

## The Bris, The Paradigm Of A Mitzvah

***Note to Parents: Please read this before sharing it with your children, there might be some parts that are not for your children's ears. Use your discretion.***

This week's parsha, Lech Lecha, tells us that Avraham had a bris (circumcision) when he was ninety nine years old. Why did he have his bris then? Because that is when Hashem commanded him to do it.

The question is asked: The Talmud tells us, that Avraham kept the whole Torah, even before it was given. If that is the case, why did he wait for Hashem to command him to do a bris? Why didn't he do it on his own, like he did all the other mitzvahs?

To understand this, we first have to understand the difference between the mitzvahs that our forefathers kept, before the Torah was given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, and the mitzvahs we do now, after Hashem gave us the Torah.

The forefathers did the mitzvahs on their own volition, without Hashem commanding them. And while it is very commendable, it doesn't have the strength that comes with a direct commandment from Hashem. Hashem commanding us to do a mitzvah, not only tells us what Hashem wants us to do, but it also gives us the ability to effect, and infuse the physical object, time or place with which the mitzvah is being done, with G-dliness.

When our forefathers did a mitzvah, it wasn't able to affect the physical, even though they might have used physical objects in the performance of a mitzvah, after they completed the mitzvah, there was no change in the status of the object. The G-dliness didn't permeate the object, it just went back to its original unholy state.

For example, when Yaakov was working for Lavan, he was going to get paid in sheep. He made a deal with Lavan, that the sheep that would be born with certain markings, would be his payment. Yaakov

then went and placed sticks with these markings, in the place where the sheep would mate. And because they would see the markings when they were mating, it would effect some of the lambs being born to have those markings.

(Note: This teaches us that our thoughts and what we see at the time of conception, surely has an affect on the child.)

The Zohar tells us, that Yaakov placing those sticks, affected the world, in the same way we do, when we put on Tefillin. However, after he was done, those sticks didn't retain the holiness of the mitzvah.

At the giving of the Torah, Hashem gave us the ability to infuse the physical with G-dliness and raise its status permanently. So in a way, our mitzvahs are more powerful than those of our forefathers.

On the other hand, the mitzvahs of our forefathers gives us the ability to do them to begin with. They are the ones who blazed the path that we tread on. As the saying goes, "The acts of our forefathers are a sign for their children." Meaning, that what they did is a sign for what we should do, and it also gives us the strength to do it, because they already did it, it is not a new path that we have to forge.

In order for them to blaze the path for us, there had to be at least one mitzvah that would be like our mitzvahs, that can infuse a physical object with G-dliness, and that it would remain that way even after the mitzvah is completed. And this one mitzvah, being the same as ours, is what connects their mitzvahs to ours. Even though their mitzvahs only affected the spiritual realms, they had one mitzvah that affected the physical, therefore, they could be the trail blazers, and give us the ability to infuse the physical through our mitzvahs.

We see the same idea with our prophets. Sometimes, when they received prophecy, Hashem would instruct them to do some physical action. Prophecy is a spiritual thing, why was it necessary to do a physical act? Because, since a prophecy is

spiritual, it is possible that it would remain in the spiritual realms, and not be drawn down and affect the physical. By doing a physical act, the prophecy would be connected to the physical, and since it was already connected to the physical, it is certain that it will have its effect on the world.

The one mitzvah that our forefathers did, that infused the physical with G-dliness, was the mitzvah of bris. The mitzvah of bris does two things. It infuses a physical - perhaps the most physical part of the body - with holiness, and the holiness remains there forever. As it says, "And My bris (covenant) will be in your flesh, for an everlasting bris (covenant)." So this mitzvah is the one where you clearly see the essential idea of mitzvahs, to infuse the physical with G-dliness.

The mitzvah of bris has two parts to it. The first is a one time deal, the circumcision. The second part of it, is that he should be circumcised, and not uncircumcised.

That is why the Rambam rules, that if one undoes his circumcision, he goes into the category of "One who rejects the covenant of Avraham our father." Because the bris isn't a one time event, rather it has to stay with him forever. Therefore, if he undoes it, he is rejecting the covenant.

So we see two things. First, the mitzvah of bris is in the actual person. Unlike other mitzvahs, that while you may use a part of the body to do them, it is not physically changed by them, it just the facilitator of the mitzvah. On the other hand, the mitzvah of bris is in the body itself, and it changes it.

Second, it is not a one time event, rather it stays with the person his entire life as a continuous mitzvah.

How do we know that it is continuously a mitzvah? The Talmud tells us, that King David once entered the bath house, and getting ready, he was very bothered that he didn't have a mitzvah with him. However when he saw that he had a bris, he was comforted, because he realized that in fact, he had a mitzvah with him. He wouldn't have been

comforted, if it wasn't a mitzvah anymore, so we have to conclude that he saw it as a mitzvah at that time.

Of course, every mitzvah that you do with a part of the body affects it even after the mitzvah is completed, however that is only a elevation in refinement and holiness, the actual mitzvah doesn't remain. With a bris, on the other hand, the actual mitzvah remains with him, even after the initial act is completed.

This will help us understand a difficulty Tosafos had on the Talmud, with the laws pertaining to a bris. The law is that a woman is not biblically obligated to have a bris done on her son (even though, it has been accepted by women, that if for some reason, no one else can arrange for a bris, they make sure it happens). The Talmud cites a verse to prove that it is in fact the law.

Tosafos asks: Why does the Talmud need to cite a verse to prove this point? There is a rule, that women are not obligated to do mitzvahs that are set to a specific time. For example, Tefillin and tzitzit, being that their obligation is that they be worn only during daytime hours, women are not obligated to keep them. The mitzvah of bris has to be done during the daytime, we are not permitted to have a bris at night. It would follow, that a woman wouldn't be obligated to have a bris done to her son. So why the need for a verse?

According to what was mentioned above, it will make sense. Being that there is an aspect of the mitzvah which is constant, that he should remain circumcised all his life and that he shouldn't be uncircumcised, one might think that a woman would be obligated. Therefore, the Talmud cites a verse to prove that, in fact, it is not the case.

These special attributes that are found in the mitzvah of bris, that it is a change in the actual person, and that it remains forever, existed before the Torah was given as well. This is the reason that when Avraham wanted his servant, Eliezer, to take an oath, he said to him, "place your hand beneath

my thigh," because it was where the only physical object of a mitzvah existed.

And now we will understand why Avraham waited for Hashem to command him to do a bris, and why he didn't do it on his own, as he did all the rest of the mitzvahs. Because this is the one mitzvah that is similar to the mitzvahs given to us at the giving of the Torah, in that, they are able to permeate the physical with G-dliness. And in order to be able to affect the physical in that way, he needed Hashem's command, because it is only possible with Hashem's command.

This clearly demonstrates how powerful our mitzvahs are. We have the power to fill the physical world with G-dliness permanently. Hashem gave us this ability when He gave us the Torah, and our forefathers blazed this path for us. So do as many mitzvahs as you can, and do them in the nicest way possible. If you do, you will fill the world with G-dliness, and that will surely bring Moshiach closer. May he come soon.

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### A Call To Every Jew

In the first verse of this week's parsha, Lech Lecha, Hashem commanded Avraham, "Lech Lecha, go for yourself, from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you." Hashem continues to tell Avraham that, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great." This is the first command to the first Jew, therefore, there must be a message here for every Jewish person, for all time. What is the message?

There are two approaches to understanding this verse. The first is that it is referring to the journey of the soul, a descent from above to below. The soul is asked to leave its home in the highest spiritual realms, and make the descent into the lowest possible realm, the physical world. But it is here that it affects the most change and accomplishes its purpose, and the effect is so powerful, that it brings Hashem's blessing and becomes great. Meaning,

that the soul is uplifted to higher spiritual realms, beyond where it was before its descent.

In this way of understanding the verse, we are given a glimpse of our purpose, the goal of every Jew, to make this world into a better place, the way Hashem wants it. A place where Hashem could call home.

The second approach is more in line with the simple meaning of the verse. It refers to the ascent from below to above we must make every day from the lowly and mundane, from "your land, your birthplace, and your father's house," which in the context of the verse, refers to a place and an atmosphere of idol worship, "to the land that I will show you," the land of Israel, a place of holiness.

This is especially poignant now after the holidays, when we are thrust into the mundane, which in chasidic teaching is called, "V'Yaakov halach l'darko, and Yaakov went on his way," meaning that every "Yaakov," every Jew, goes on his way after the holidays, doing his mission to transform his part of the world into a dwelling place for Hashem.

The name Yaakov is used here, which comes from the word eikev, a heel, which is the lowest part of a person's body, because we can even transform the lowest part of ourselves to do Hashem's will. When the heel is transformed and moves in the ways of Hashem, it takes the rest of the body with it.

We see this on Simchas Torah, the end of the holidays, when we celebrate through dancing with the soles of our feet, and they make the body and head dance as well. This is the same message, and a preparation for the rest of the year, that if you can get the lowest part of you to serve Hashem, then all of yourself will serve Hashem. And if you can transform the lowest part of the world into a dwelling place for Hashem, then you transform the whole world. Because when you lift something from the bottom, you lift the whole thing.

It is through Torah, mitzvahs and living the life of a Jew that transforms this world, and we have the power to do it, we inherited it from our forefather

Avraham. It is through this work that we complete Hashem's command to Avraham, "Lech Lecha."

Although these two explanations are opposites, the first a descent, and the second an ascent, they are both explanations of the same verse, and therefore simultaneously true. And we have to take both messages at the same time. That we have descended to effect this world, and we should try to change it from the bottom up.

So "Lech Lecha," is a call to every Jewish person, to do all you can to complete the mission and make this world into a home for Hashem. It is through both of these approaches working simultaneously that we create an environment that the highest levels of G-dliness, even the levels that are beyond the world, to enter the world and become part of our lives.

This is the key to the blessings found in our parsha, and the path to the ultimate blessing, the coming of Moshiach. May he come soon.

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### Powerful Mouths

The Haftora for parshas Lech Lecha, extols the virtues of the Jewish people, the children of Avraham, in contrast to the other nations of the world. It encourages us to stay strong during the exile, that we should not be afraid because Hashem is always with us and He can be relied upon. Ultimately it is us, the Jewish people, who put our hope in Hashem, who will be strengthened and redeemed, while the nations will face divine judgment for not recognizing Hashem, despite all the clear indications that He is the one and only true G-d, and for all the suffering they put us through.

The connection of this Haftora to parshas Lech Lecha, is the references to Avraham, how with Hashem's help, he journeyed away from idol worshippers, taught the world about Hashem, and was victorious over powerful kings, all of which are mentioned in the parsha.

The parsha tells about the founding of the Jewish people and the beginning of our mission in this world. Therefore, it makes sense, that the Haftora encourages us and extols the virtues that make us the chosen ones for Hashem's plan. It also makes sense that it tells us about the final redemption, because that is the goal and reward of our mission.

The Haftora opens with a reassurance, that although we may feel at times, that our efforts to follow the Torah are being ignored by Hashem, that is never the case. Rather, Hashem's wisdom is beyond ours and therefore, we don't understand why He puts us in situations that seem undesirable.

In the end, He is the One who "gives the faint strength." Though the enemies of the Jewish people seem youthful and powerful, they will grow "tired and weary..., and stumble. But those who hope in Hashem will renew (lit. Exchange) their strength, grow wings like an eagle, they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not tire."

Why does the verse use the word "exchange" to mean renew? It means, that when we use all our strength to serve Hashem and become weary, then our limited strength will be exchanged for Hashem's strength, which is unlimited. We will then be able to take our service to a whole new level, deepening our connection with Hashem ad infinitum.

Now the Haftora tells us how Hashem will judge the nations of the world. He will first reprove them, and let them bring forth their arguments, if they have any, in defense. But of course they have no defense for their wrong doing. Hashem will tell them that He sent them Avraham, who taught them about Him. They saw that Hashem was with him and did amazing miracles for him, and He gave him power over the mightiest kings. Yet they ignore the clear signs with cognitive dissonance, and they support each other in perpetuating lies, continuing to make and serve idols. As it says, "Each one will help his friend and to his brother he will say, be strong." all this, just to hold on to idol worship.

The Midrash explains this verse in a positive light, that it refers to Avraham and Shem, supporting each other after the war between the four kings and the five kings, spoken about in our parsha. There is a lesson here for us as well. We should always help each other, and even when we can't help, we should give words of encouragement.

In contrast to the nations of the world, "You Yisrael my servant, Yaakov whom I have chosen, children of Avraham who loved Me." Sometimes it is the children that bring out the greatness of their parents, as their conduct is a reflection of them and it is only because of the parents virtues, that the children are so wonderful. Same is with the Jewish people. Because of our forefather Avraham, we have it in us to be amazing, and our actions show how great Avraham's love for Hashem was.

The Haftora continues, that Hashem will gather us from the ends of the earth and that we should not fear because Hashem is with us. Even more, don't be afraid, "For I Am Hashem your G-d, Who holds your right hand."

Then the Haftora says the strangest thing. "Do not fear worm Yaakov." Why are we called a worm? This worm we speak of here, is weak. Its only strength is in its mouth, with which it can destroy cedars. We too, our power is not in our bodies, our true strength is in our mouths. Through our Torah study and prayer, we can do amazing things.

This is also a lesson on the power of speech. We are told that when one speaks loshon hara, badly of another person, three are negatively affected. The one who says it, the one that hears it, and the one being spoken about. I understand why the speaker and the hearer are affected, because they are both there when the words were spoken. However, the one being spoken of, is not there, why would it affect him? Because our mouths are powerful and when we speak badly of another, it brings out negative in that person.

The opposite is true as well. When you speak good of another, you bring out good qualities in that person, even if they weren't there before. Just

imagine how much good we can do by using the power of our speech to lift others up.

Let us use our mouths for good things. Praying, learning Torah, and bringing out good in others. If we do, we will change the world for good, and we will be able to experience the last words of the Haftora, that when Moshiach comes we "will rejoice in Hashem and glory in the Holy One of Israel." May it happen soon.

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### Turning Pain Into Purpose

In this week's parsha, Lech Lecha, we read that Hashem commanded Avraham, that he and all his male descendants, have a Bris (circumcision). And so, at the age of ninety nine he circumcised himself, thereby entering into a covenant with Hashem.

This is so significant, that even today, when someone has a Bris, the blessing we say is "to enter him into the covenant of Avraham our father."

The Rambam (Maimonides) tells us, that when we do a Bris today, it is not done because of the command to Avraham, rather we do it because of the command Hashem gave to Moshe at Sinai. The same is true regarding all mitzvahs that our ancestors kept before the giving of the Torah. Though they did these mitzvahs, we are not required to do them because they did, but rather, because Hashem commanded us to at Mount Sinai. If this is the case, why do we say, "to enter him into the covenant of Avraham our father," wouldn't it make more sense to say, "to enter him into the covenant with Hashem?"

Another question. Mitzvahs are meant to be done with joy, as it says, "Serve Hashem with joy." Yet here we are required to do something that causes pain, which is the opposite of joy. Even more, pain is part of the mitzvah, and because of that, we don't use anesthetics, or anything else to numb the pain. Why are we required to do a mitzvah that causes pain? And why is pain part of the mitzvah?

The Shulchan Aruch Harav (The Code of Law from Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Rebbe of Chabad) tells us, that the Neshama enters the body at the Bris. However, we are taught, that while still in the womb, an angel teaches the baby Torah, which would mean that the Neshama is already present in the womb. So what does he mean by saying, that it enters at the Bris?

There is a difference between the Neshama being present and it entering the body. When a boy is born, the Neshama is already present, however it is not fused with the physical body. The act of the Bris on the physical body, fuses the physical and the spiritual, the new Neshama with the body.

This is also the purpose of every Jew, to make this world into a dwelling place for Hashem's presence, by fusing physical existence with holiness. We do this by using physical objects and places, in their natural state, for mitzvahs or to serve Hashem. When it comes to the body, we do a Bris to do this fusion, and since we want the effect to be complete, we do it in the most natural way, hence the necessity of pain. While in normal circumstances, we may not put ourselves into a situation that will cause our bodies pain, here, in order to fulfill Hashem's commandment properly, we find joy in doing His mitzvah even with the pain.

By a girl, the fusion happens at the naming. This is why we try to name a girl by the Torah at the first possible opportunity.

The question is asked: Why do we make such a big deal about Avraham's sacrifice at the Akeida, the binding of his son Yitzchak on to the altar, when throughout our history, many have sacrificed themselves in a similar fashion and perhaps greater, and what more, Avraham had a direct command from Hashem, while they did not? The answer is, that he was the first, which breaks the ice for the rest. It is hardest to be the first, but once it has already been done, it is easier for others to do.

The same is true for the Bris, Avraham was the first, making it easier for those who came after him.

You may ask: How can you compare self sacrifice, with Bris? By self sacrifice there is a mental edge which makes it a little easier, knowing that Avraham already did it. However a Bris is done to a baby, who has no idea what Avraham did or didn't do. And what more, knowing that Avraham already gave the ultimate sacrifice, gives a mental edge to another in a similar situation. But just because Avraham had a Bris first, doesn't make the physical pain of a Bris any less.

This is the reason why we say the blessing, "to enter him into the covenant of Avraham." Because just like Avraham, everyone who has a Bris, is as if he is the first.

The same is true for all the painful situations Hashem puts us in. If we can see them as a mission from Hashem, we will find meaning, purpose and maybe even joy in them.

This is one of the ideas that has kept me positive since I was diagnosed with ALS. I feel that Hashem has chosen me for a mission. And though I don't like my situation and I want to be healed, I understand that Hashem put me here for a reason. And as long as I am here, I will use my situation to do His work, in any way I can, uplifting the spirits of people through teaching, smiling and finding good in the people I meet.

May Hashem send Moshiach and put an end to our pain. The time has come.

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### Experience The Connection

This week's Parsha, Lech Lecha, starts when Avram is seventy five years old. Hashem tells him his first command, to go to a land that He will show him.

Why doesn't the Torah tell us about his early life, how he recognized his creator, how he came to understand that Hashem is the one true G-d and the sacrifices he made, standing up for his belief in Hashem? Why doesn't the Torah tell us about the

kind of person he was, as it does by Noach, "Noach was a righteous man...?" What lesson is the Torah trying to impress on us by starting the story of Avram with a command?

Avram was the first Jew. His life is a lesson on what being a Jew is all about. The Torah only shares stories of Avram that provide a lesson for us, on how to be a Jew.

By opening with Hashem's first command to Avram, Hashem is sending us a message. That the connection between Hashem and a Jew is not based on one's understanding of Hashem, so that the greater the understanding the greater the connection. Rather our connection is because he chose us regardless of our philosophical or theological understanding. Our connection is greater than any understanding, it is an intrinsic connection with Hashem, because he chose us, like he chose Avram.

By not describing Avram's character, Hashem stresses this point. That a Jew is always connected, regardless of his or her spiritual state.

Also, opening with a command, tells us that our purpose is, first and foremost, to do Hashem's commandments. The way we experience this connection is by doing Mitzvas.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you need to reach some spiritual level to start doing Mitzvas. The opposite is true, by doing Mitzvas you experience the infinite connection that is always there.

This week many are experiencing this connection by the Great Challah Bake, where thousands of Jewish women are getting together to do the Mitzva of Challah and by a global Shabbat, Jews all over the world are uniting to keep Shabbos. If you can take part, wonderful, if not find a mitzva that you can do regularly and if you are already keeping the Mitzvas, find a way to do them better.

Have a beautiful Shabbos and may it truly be a unifying one.

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## Avraham and Sarah

Avraham was born 300 years after the flood, he was the 10th generation from Noah. Noah lived 350 years after the flood, so it is certain that Avraham saw him. He actually studied at his yeshiva (Torah Academy), later known as the yeshiva of Shem and Ever, the son and great grandson of Noah.

When Avraham was born, it was a time of Idol worship. The city he was born in, was ruled by Nimrod, the ruler of most of civilization. Nimrod was the first ruler of people after the flood, he was a very powerful leader and he was black. Idol worship was a way of controlling the minds of the people, only free thinkers believed in Hashem and they were scoffed at and persecuted. Nimrod saw believers of Hashem as a threat to his power and he would deal with them harshly.

Avraham's father was Terach, an important man, and he had an Idol business.

When Avraham was born, Nimrod's astrologers advised him to have the baby killed, because he was going to be a threat to his rule. Terach switched another baby in place of Avraham and his mother hid him in a cave.

When Avraham was 3 years old, he recognized that Idol worship was silly, and he went on a search for G-d and came to the conclusion that He couldn't be anything in the world, He had to be greater than the world.

When he got older, he went to study in the yeshiva of Noah, Shem and Ever. When he was forty he returned to Babel and started to teach about Hashem. He was treading a dangerous path. Everything came to a head with one story.

Avraham's father, Terach, asked him to watch his business, the Idols. When his father left, he took an ax and smashed all the Idols except for the largest one and he placed the ax in the largest one's hand. When his father returned, he asked Avraham, "what

happened?" Avraham told him that he brought some food for the Idols and they started to fight over the food. The big one took the ax, smashed all of the other Idols and took the food for himself.

His father was fuming, "You know that Idols can't do anything, you did this." Avraham replied, "if Idols can't do anything, why do you serve them?" It was a clear demonstration of the fallacy of Idol worship. Word spread quickly and Nimrod had Avraham thrown into a blazing furnace. Hashem made a miracle and the inside of the furnace turned into a garden for him. When he was taken out of the furnace, his brother Haran proclaimed his belief in Hashem, and Nimrod had Haran thrown into the furnace, and he burned to death.

Haran had two daughters Milka and Yiska. Avraham married Yiska, who was also called Sarai, and Hashem later changed her name to Sarah.

Sarah or Sarai, means a minister, Yiska, or in English, Jessica, comes from the word nesicha, which means a princess. Sarah was extremely beautiful, graceful and dignified, like a minister and a princess. (interesting to note that Sarah Jessica is a common name)

She kept the laws of purity, mikva, and because of that, there was always a cloud of Hashem's presence hovering above her tent. She kept the mitzvah of challah, and her bread was blessed because of it. Only a little bit of it filled you up and satisfied you (like lembas). And she kept the mitzvah of lighting Shabbat candles and a miracle would occur, they would continue to burn all week, until it was time to light them again.

These Mitzvos are really special to Jewish women, who are all daughters of Sarah, our mother.