"Open my eyes so that I may see the **wonders** of Your Torah"

נט"ד

# Wonders

Weekly Magazine of the Shiurim and Farbrengens

of HaRav **Yitzchak Ginsburgh**

**Issue 148**

**Shabbat Tazria-Metzora 5785 ❁ May 2-3, 2025**

שַׁבָּת תַּזְרִיעַ-מְצֹרָע ❁ ד-ה אִיָּיר תשפ"ה



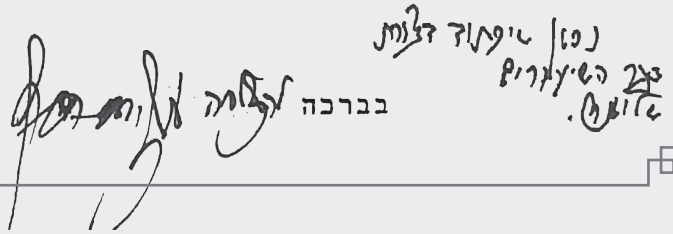
*In her pursuit of her connection with God, the woman is less in need of lowliness. The male's lowliness is rooted in "his [definitive] foreskin." A man who does not have the strength and courage to acknowledge "his foreskin" has a problem.*

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*The Lubavitcher Rebbe to Rav Ginsburgh, Elul 5741*

*"…It would be proper to publish your classes in book form. With blessings for success…"*



# Wonders

An anthology from the shiurim and farbrengens
of Harav **Yitzchak Ginsburgh**

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Cover artwork: "Blue Blood" by Liora Talia Mazig (liora.mazig@gmail.com)
At the moment of circumcision, the soul enters the child's body.
All of the Jewish people are noble, hence the blue blood on the cotton ball.


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PARTZUF

# THE LAWS OF CIRCUMCISION

## THE TWO APPEARANCES OF CIRCUMCISION

This week's *parashah* begins with the verses,

> If a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, she shall become ritually defiled for seven days to the same degree as in the days of her menstrual flow. On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

These are very central verses in the Torah, because it is from here that we as they speak of the commandment of circumcision. The commentators[1] ask why the commandment of circumcision with its particular details appears only now. Could these details not have been included in the commandment of circumcision already given to Abraham in *parashat Lech Lecha*?

There are different answers to this question.[2] Let us reply using *gematria*. The Lubavitcher Rebbe loved the number 27, the *gematria* of "pure" (זָךְ) a great deal, because it is three to the third power: 3 times 3 times 3. *Lech Lecha* is the third portion in the Torah, while our *parashah*, *Tazria,* is the 27th. This is a beautiful connection between *Lech Lecha* and *Tazria and the two mentions of circumcision.*

As noted, there are many details that the sages learn from these opening verses of *Parashat Tazria*. Our *partzuf*-model for this week's parashah will take all these teachings—there are at least eleven different teachings or *halachot* that the sages, both from the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud learn from these words—and organize them into a structure. That means we will associate each explanation, each law learned, with a particular *sefirah*, a power in the soul. Each such association is the basis for another rectification and perfection of a power of the soul.

## CROWN AND KNOWLEDGE: CIRCUMCISION OVERRIDES SHABBAT AND *TZARA'AT*

Let us begin with what it means and how we learn that circumcision overrides *tzara'at*, the spiritual skin ailment that is commonly translated as leprosy. *Tzara'at* really has nothing obvious to do with modern day leprosy, so we will usually call it by its Hebrew name, *tzara'at*.

Immediately following the commandment to circumcise, the Torah details the laws of *tzara'at*. One of the grave prohibitions governing *tzara'at* is to not cut away or remove *tzara'at* from the body to purify it. The sages learn this from the verse, "Take care regarding the lesion to meticulously safeguard [to act in accordance with all that the Levite priests instruct you]."[3]

But what if the lesion is located on the male procreative organ, performing circumcision would mean cutting off the lesion. Because the laws of circumcision

are followed by the laws of *tzara'at*, the sages learn that in such a case circumcision overrides the prohibition to cut off the lesion.

The sages explain why we need to learn this principle that circumcision overrides *tzara'at* from the verse "On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." Why is it not enough that we have a general principle that states that a positive commandment overrides a prohibitive one. They answer that because the prohibition not to remove a *tzara'at* lesion is stated in the positive, "Take care regarding the lesion to meticulously safeguard…," it is considered to contain both a prohibition and a positive element. When this is the case, the positive commandment to perform circumcision is not enough to annul the prohibition of removing the lesion. That is why the Torah needs a special verse, "On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be removed," to override the prohibition from cutting away the lesion. This is our first example of a *halachah* that connects the beginning of the parsha with what follows.

To be even more precise, we might ask, from which word do we learn that circumcision overrides *tzara'at*? From the word "flesh [of his foreskin]." The word "flesh" is enough to teach that even if there is a lesion in the flesh, it should be removed.

Another *halachah* is taught with relation to this relationship between circumcision and *tzara'at*. Say you encounter such a situation where there is a lesion on the child's foreskin. While you are removing the foreskin, and of course the lesion, to fulfil the commandment of circumcision, you are not allowed to intend that you are also purifying the *tzara'at*. The *tzara'at* must be purified even in this case, naturally, i.e., without premeditation. This is an example of an action that is performed above reason and understanding, to use the idiom used in Chasidic thought.

## CIRCUMCISION OVERRIDES SHABBAT

In our times, *tzara'at* is not commonly found, at least not in its straightforward form, but what is still relevant today is that circumcision overrides Shabbat. In fact, probability would have it that this *halachah* is relevant in one out of every seven circumcisions.

There is something about the eighth day that is more important and stronger than the seventh. The secret of the number eight is greater than that of seven. Seven is the Shabbat, the seventh day, and the eighth is the circumcision.

From where do we learn that circumcision overrides Shabbat? From the word "and on the [eighth] day" (וּבַיּוֹם). It must be done on the eighth day, even if the eighth day is a Shabbat.

## SHABBAT AND TZARAAT: PLEASURE AND AFFLICTION

How should we draw a correspondence between these two laws and the sefirot in our *partzuf*/model? There must be some connection between these first two *halachot*, since they both follow the formulation that circumcision overrides something. To understand the connection between Shabbat and *tzara'at*, let us turn to the well-known statement from *Sefer Yetzirah*, "There is no good that is higher than pleasure (**עֹנֶג**) and no evil lower than

affliction (**נֶגַע**)." What is pleasure and what is affliction? The holy Shabbat is the ultimate pleasure, as it says, "Then you will take pleasure in Havayah" (אָז תִּתְעַנַּג עַל הוי'). The main *mitzvah* of Shabbat is the pleasure of Shabbat—*oneg Shabbat*. Affliction (נֶגַע) is clearly *tzara'at*—the primary affliction in the Torah. In addition, in Aramaic, the word for "evil" (רַע) also means sickness, and the worst sickness is *tzara'at*.

Now where do these two *halachot* fit in the *sefirot*? Since we are learning and grounding these ideas according to *Sefer Yetzirah*, and in it each of the sefirot is referred to as a "depth" (עֹמֶק), good and evil are akin to the "depth of good" (עֹמֶק טוֹב) and the "depth of evil" (עֹמֶק רַע). The first refers to the cornet of loving-kindness of the *sefirah* of knowledge (*da'at*) and the second to the cornet of judgments in knowledge. Therefore, it can be said simply that the law that circumcision override Shabbat corresponds to the loving-kindness within knowledge, whose root is—and according to others this is the intent of the cornet of loving-kindness within knowledge—in the supernal crown.

To use Kabbalistic language, the pleasure of Shabbat is related to the seven lower *sefirot* of *Atik*, which because they enclothe within the lower part of the crown, can be sensed. However, the pleasure of circumcision cannot be sensed, it is beyond experience, which places it in the realm of faith, referring to the three highest *sefirot* of Atik, which cannot be experienced. This exactly parallels the premise that one may not derive pleasure (i.e., benefit) from circumcising a foreskin that has a lesion—the benefit of having gotten rid of the *tzara'at*. But despite the fact that the pleasure is not experienced, the circumcision is so much stronger than the lesion, that in a natural and unmeditated manner, it can heal *tzara'at*.[4]

So, we have that *tzara'at* and Shabbat are the two coronets of the *sefirah* of knowledge or and that the circumcision itself is in the crown, particularly in faith, the highest third of the crown.

## WISDOM: THE FATHER'S COMMANDMENT TO CIRCUMCISE HIS SON

Let us quickly review some other laws of circumcision. The Torah places the duty to circumcise a child specifically on his father.[5] From where do we learn this? According to the Jerusalem Talmud it is learnt from the verb, "shall be circumcised" (יִמּוֹל). On the other hand, the Babylonian Talmud states that the source is from Abraham, "Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old."[6] This verse is what we say in the blessing of the circumcision. Either way, clearly this *halachah* corresponds to the *sefirah* of wisdom, known as the Father principle.

## UNDERSTANDING: THE PARENTS' JOY IN THE MOTHER'S PURITY

Why do we wait eight days to perform the circumcision? There is a reason in the Talmud in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi). Rashbi is commonly identified with the radiance of the Supernal Mother, i.e., with the *sefirah* of understanding. The reason is that it would not be proper that everyone should be joyful at the birth of the new child, but the father and mother should be sad because

they are now forbidden from having physical contact. Therefore, they wait until the eighth day. On the seventh day the mother immerses herself in the *mikveh* to purify herself from the defilement of childbirth, as written in the previous verse, "And she shall be unclean for seven days." And then immediately, it says, "And on the eighth day [after she has purified], he shall be circumcised." Subsequently, after the first seven days, even if the mother sees blood, it is considered blood that is pure and does not defile (according to the law of the Torah).

All commandments should be performed with joy, and specifically in the case of circumcision, it is written, "I rejoice at Your word, like one who finds great spoil."[7] One should be even more joyous about the commandment of circumcision than any other. All commandments are for the sake of joy, and the essence of this commandment is the joy of a *mitzvah* that requires self-sacrifice, the joy of the continuity of the Jewish people, and the joy of a *mitzvah* that is the root and source of the entire Torah. Joy is the inner experience of the *sefirah* of understanding, of the mother principle (*Imma*), about which it says, "the mother of the children is joyous"[8] (especially when she is pure for her husband).

## LOVING-KINDNESS AND MIGHT: CIRCUMCISION ON THE EIGHTH DAY AFTER SUNRISE.

From the phrase "on the eighth day," the sages learn[9] that circumcision is to be performed during daylight and not at night. The sages then continue to note that, "the vigilant are early to perform commandments." From whom do we learn this principle? From Abraham, who is the archetypal soul of loving-kindness. Daylight itself represents loving-kindness, as it is written, "By day God commands His loving-kindness upon me"[10] and the first day of Creation, which corresponds to loving-kindness and which is called "light" in the verse, "God called the light 'day.'"[11]

Along with this, it is taught that one must wait until sunrise, and it is forbidden to perform the circumcision beforehand. There are many commandments that can be performed between dawn and sunrise ex post facto. Circumcision is one of them, but really one should wait until sunrise. There is a verse that captures this, "As the sun goes out in its might." Circumcision is a source of might in the child's life. It gives strength for restraint. To guard one's covenant with love, love that is fiery love, meaning that it is the aspect of might and restraint within love, the circumcision needs to be performed after the sun rises in its might. Obviously, this law corresponds to the *sefirah* of might, which strengthens the love that is loving-kindness and transforms it from love like water to fiery love.

## BEAUTY: STRENGTHENING THE BODY

The aspect of beauty in circumcision is the second reason why we wait eight days to circumcise the child. The Rambam brings this reason in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. There are commentators who are puzzled by why he did not bring the reason stated by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the Talmud. However, they seem to have missed the fact that the reason he

does bring is written in the Midrash.

This is a very straightforward reason, which is what the Rambam prefers: we wait eight days to circumcise the child to allow him to get stronger; so that all his organs have time to become strong, and he will be able to undergo the circumcision without danger. However, this reason raises another question. An animal, after seven days, is no longer considered a potential miscarriage, but for a child it takes thirty days until he is no longer considered a miscarriage, which is why we perform the redemption of the firstborn only after thirty days. Why is it then that we do not wait for thirty days before circumcising the child?

What is the nature of this reason that Maimonides offers as a type of natural explanation for circumcision? There are those who want to say that it is related to the sages' statement that the Torah commands us to wait until the eighth day, so that "the child experiences a Shabbat." Shabbat is a source of health for a Jew, as the sages state, "It is Shabbat… and healing is near."[12] By simply experiencing a Shabbat, even without consciousness of the day, a Jew is strengthened—it strengthens both the soul and the body, because for a Jew, the soul and the body depend on one another. The Rambam does not mention this in his explanation in the Guide, but this is what some of the later sages add.

We could also take the opposite approach. Since we see that even an animal is strong enough after 7 days to be considered healthy and not a miscarried birth, this certainly also affects the bodily dimension of a child. So, even though a Jewish child is strongly connected with his soul and therefore can be redeemed only after 30 days, already after 7 days, the body is strong enough to undergo circumcision.

This aspect of waiting until the eighth day to circumcise corresponds to beauty because of the Tikkunei Zohar's statement, "beauty [*tiferet*] is the body" (תִּפְאֶרֶת – גּוּפָא).

## VICTORY: CIRCUMCISION ALWAYS DURING THE DAY

For loving-kindness, we saw the teaching that circumcision on the eighth day must be during the day, not at night. The sages continue with another teaching, that even if the circumcision must be postponed for valid reasons, be it the ninth day, the tenth day, the eleventh day, and the twelfth day, whatever the delay, it must still be done during the day, not at night. We place this law in victory (*netzach*) since it is the branch of loving-kindness. It also fits beautifully since the name of this *sefirah* (*netzach*) can also be translated as "eternity," i.e., the only *sefirah* whose name is explicitly related to the continuum of time.

We mentioned up to 12 days after the birth because these are "normal" scenarios for delaying the circumcision? If the baby was born at twilight, the circumcision should take place on the ninth day; if during twilight at the start of Shabbat, it should be on the tenth day; if it was the twilight before Shabbat that is followed by a festival, the circumcision should take place on the eleventh day; and if it is the twilight before Shabbat that is followed by the two days of Rosh Hashanah, it should take place on the twelfth day. This is the explanation of this teaching from the sages,

specifying five days when the circumcision should be performed initially, depending on when the child is born.

This explains a question asked by Lubavitchers. There is a common saying that a Lubavitcher is born on the 10th of Kislev (the day the Mittler Rebbe was released from jail), and his circumcision is on the 19th of Kislev. But these are ten days, not eight! Here, we see that according to the sages, circumcision can be on the eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, or twelfth day. The sum of these numbers—8, 9, 10, 11, and 12—is 50.

How are 8 and 50 connected? 8 is 7 plus 1 and 50 is 7 squared plus—like the 50 days of the Counting of the Omer. A regular circumcision is on the eighth day, but all these alternately "regular" days add up to fifty. Moreover, since there are 5 possible numbers of days, their average value is 10, which exactly corresponds to the ten days from the 10th of Kislev to the 19th of Kislev.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT: CIRCUMCISION DEPENDS ON RITUAL DEFILEMENT

Circumcision on the eighth day is only required when the woman is impure due to childbirth. We learn this from the juxtaposition of the two issues in sequential verses:

If a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, she shall become ritually defiled for seven days…. On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

But if there is a situation where childbirth does not cause her ritual defilement, the circumcision is not delayed until the eighth day. How can this happen? One option is that the child was born by cesarean section. In practice, today, we do wait the full eight days even in case of a c-section, based on the *Rosh* who was the first to rule so. However, by the letter of the law, one would not wait the full eight days.

There is another possibility that the mother would not be impure after delivery. This is the case of a woman who gives birth and then converts on the same day. She gave birth naturally and then converted, so she is not impure due to childbirth. In this case, the circumcision should be done immediately. The *Rosh* writes that even in this case, today we wait eight days.

We previously discussed the connection between circumcision, leprosy, and Shabbat, and here we see a true and deep connection between menstrual impurity (**נִדָּה**) and circumcision (**מִילָה**). The sum of their values is 12 squared—thus numerically, the two words complement one another. The verse that ties the two together is one that describes the *sefirah* of acknowledgment (hod(: "My *hod* is turned to against me"[13] (וְהוֹדִי נֶהְפַּךְ עָלַי לְמִשְׁחִית) and the letters of "hod" (**הוֹד**) permute to spell a synonym for menstruation (**דָּוָה**).[14] It is clear according to the Torah's inner dimension that circumcision on the eighth day is intrinsically connected to menstrual impurity and the *sefirah* of *hod*.

Here is also the place to say that for someone who wishes to merit healthy and lasting offspring, especially male children, the primary merit is the observance of the laws of family purity. Some interpreters learn this from here. This is a very important principle.

## FOUNDATION: CIRCUMCISION ON THE EIGHTH DAY ONLY FOR A CHILD THAT IS DEFINITELY MALE

Corresponding to the *sefirah* of foundation, we place the *halachah* that only when the child is known to be definitively male, is the circumcision delayed until the eighth day. Otherwise, it should be done immediately, according to the letter of the law. We learn this from the words, "and gives birth to a male.... on the eighth day, his foreskin shall be circumcised." Sometimes a child is born with concealed genitalia. This is called a *tumtum. If subsequently the skin covering the genitalia is removed and it is revealed that* the child is indeed male, then according to the law, one does not wait for the eighth day.

From the Chasidic point of view, a male is a giver, one who is meant to influence others. Indeed, "male" (**זָכָר**) has the same value as "blessing" (**בְּרָכָה**). Thus, by definition, masculinity has the innate nature of being revealed immediately. Though all the laws we are reviewing and corresponding to the *sefirot* should be explained according to Chasidic thought, let us discuss this one.

Some people think there is an issue with revealing that one is a giver and an influencer (a *mashpia*). Indeed, there are some *chasidim* that hide their intention to affect and influence others. However, here it is written that the essence of birth, of coming into the world, is not to hide for even a moment that you are male, that you identify with the need to affect others to grow closer to God by doing outreach and more specifically the Lubavitcher Rebbe's campaigns. By not concealing this, by acting upon this essential call of our generation, one merits to draw down "the eighth day," the 8 that is higher than the 7.[15]

## KINGDOM: CIRCUMCISION ON THE EIGHTH DAY ONLY WITH A DEFINITIVE FORESKIN

Lastly, we have a similar halachah to the one we placed in foundation. From the last word of the verse, "his foreskin," we learn that only when the child has a definitive foreskin is there an obligation to circumcise on the eighth day, but if there is a doubt about the foreskin, there is no obligation. There are a few possibilities here when this would happen. We will only look at the two central ones.

The first is when a person is born already circumcised; then there is an obligation to perform the act of drawing a drop of blood (known as *Hatafat Dam Brit*), but since there is no definitive foreskin, there is no obligation to circumcise on the eighth day and the drawing of the drop of blood does not overrule the Shabbat. In other words, if someone is born circumcised on Shabbat, the drawing of blood is not performed on the next Shabbat, even though doing so is part and parcel of the commandment to circumcise.

The second example is a case of a so-called androgynous child—one who has both male and female sexual characteristics. Such a child, who has even partial characteristics of both male and female genitalia is not considered a definitive male, and therefore, does not fulfill the requirement of having "foreskin" that must be circumcised on the eighth day.

## THE RECTIFICATION OF KINGDOM THROUGH CERTAINTY IN GENDER IDENTITY

From this, we can learn something very profound related to our generation. The blemish of kingdom is the blurring of gender identity. If any one can be "androgynous"— unsure about whether they are male or female, or perhaps both—that constitutes a breakdown of kingdom, of society. The Torah here is describing a state of "half-half" as one that is not good—it is an undesirable situation.

We can say this in another way. Who is the archetypal soul of kingdom. Everyone knows that the archetypal soul of foundation is Joseph the Righteous and that the archetypal soul of loving-kindness is Abraham our Patriarch, and so on regarding the other *sefirot*. But what about kingdom? It is associated with the month of Iyar, and if you write Iyar with two yuds (**אִיֵּיר**), it serves as an acronym for the four archetypal souls of the sefirot that correspond to the Divine Chariot. The four souls are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Rachel (**א**ַבְרָהָם **י**ִצְחָק **י**ַעֲקֹב **ר**ָחֵל). These are the four souls who appear in the Pentateuch. David was not yet present. So, in kingdom, we find two archetypal souls either the matriarch Rachel who is one hundred percent female, or King David, who is one hundred percent male. An androgynous gender identification constitutes a blemish and weakens the *sefirah* of kingdom. Even in their male side, they do not fulfill the command of "on the eighth day, his foreskin shall be circumcised" to override Shabbat.

## LOWLINESS TO ACKNOWLEDGE OUR FORESKIN

In the account of creation, there are nine mentions of the word "good," which is related to the covenant—the *sefirah* of foundation—and one mention of "evil." The inner aspect of kingdom is the lowliness of King David. Lowliness means being able to acknowledge the bad or dark side within oneself. What we learn from the idea that maleness, i.e., one's King-David-like quality of lowliness should be immediately apparent is that whenever one encounters negativity in life, one must spontaneously attribute the source of this negativity in oneself. This is the first step to not becoming a victimized individual who eventually becomes incapacitated. All rectification in life begins with this important quality of lowliness.

If someone is psychologically, so-to-speak androgynous, they are unable to take responsibility for the negativity they are confronting. It is not clear to them that the root of the negativity or darkness is actually from within. To have a "definitive foreskin," one must have a clear sense that fixing their situation begins with fixing themselves.

And a note for those familiar with our teachings on lowliness: there is somewhat of a paradox since lowliness is the inner experience of kingdom, which is associated with the feminine counterpart (*Nukva*). One might think because of this that women require more lowliness than men (and that the primary demand from a man is to have self-nullification, the inner experience of wisdom). But we have explained many times that this is not correct; it is the opposite.

In her pursuit of her connection with God, the woman is less in need of lowliness. The male's lowliness is rooted in "his [definitive] foreskin." A man who does not have the strength and courage to acknowledge "his foreskin" has a problem. He is not acting like a man by not taking responsibility, with lowliness, for his dark side and the evil within. That is why God created us with foreskin, even though He wanted us to perfect ourselves and thereby be able to rectify reality. This is the essence of the sages' teaching that the work of the righteous is greater than the work of God.[16] This is precisely how God wants it. He wants to build the world on an initially imperfect reality, one that is even described as "trash."[17] Thus, to be male means to be born with definitive foreskin. This is the essence of rectifying kingdom through lowliness.

Our final *partzuf* is thus,

**crown-keter כֶּתֶר**

**knowledge-da'at דַּעַת**

circumcision overrides Shabbat and tzara'at מִילָה דּוֹחָה שַׁבָּת וּמִילָה דּוֹחָה צָרַעַת

**understanding-binah בִּינָה**

parents joy on eighth day

מִילָה בַּשְּׁמִינִי שֶׁהַהוֹרִים יִשְׂמְחוּ

**wisdom-chochmah חָכְמָה**

the father is obligated to circumcise his son

הָאָב חַיָּב לָמוּל אֶת בְּנוֹ

**might-gevurah גְּבוּרָה**

circumcision after sunrise

מִילָה לְאַחַר "צֵאת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בִּגְבוּרָתוֹ"

**loving-kindness-chessed חֶסֶד**

circumcision during the day

מִילָה בַּיּוֹם וְלֹא בַּלַּיְלָה

**beauty-tiferet תִּפְאֶרֶת**

circumcision on the eighth so that the child is healthy

מִילָה בַּשְּׁמִינִי שֶׁיִּתְחַזֵּק כּוֹחוֹ

**splendor-hod הוֹד**

circumcision on the eighth when mother is ritually impure מִילָה בַּשְּׁמִינִי רַק כְּשֶׁהָאֵם טְמֵאָה

**victory-netzach נֶצַח**

circumcision during day even when naturally postponed מִילָה בַּיּוֹם - תָּמִיד

**foundation-yesod יְסוֹד**

must be definitively male

זָכָר וַדַּאי מֻרְגָּע לַדָּתוֹ

**kingdom-malchut מַלְכוּת**

must have a definitive foreskin

עָרְלָה וַדַּאי

Notes:
1. See *Or HaChaim* on this verse.
2. Again see the *Or HaChaim*.
3. Deuteronomy 24:8
4. Another way of describing the relationship between the Shabbat and *tzara'at* in Kabbalistic language is that they are both related to the lower seven *sefirot*, or the backside of *Atik* (also known as the בן of *Atik*). Shabbat is the masculine component in the backside and *tzara'at* is the feminine component in the backside. But circumcision is related to the higher three *sefirot* of frontside of *Atik*, also known as the *Radla* (the Unknowable Head). The frontside also has masculine and feminine components, and both correspond to circumcision.
5. *Hilchot Milah* 1:1.
6. Genesis 21:4.
7. Psalms 119:162.
8. Psalms 113:9.
9. *Pesachim* 4a and *Yoma* 28b.
10. Psalms 42:9.
11. Genesis
12. *Shabbat* 12b.
13. Daniel 10:8.
14. As in Lamentations 1:13.
15. See also in last week's issue on the number 8.
16. *Ketubot* 5a.
17. *Bereishit Rabbah* 1:5.

STORY

# REBBE MORDECHAI (MOTTEL) OF CHERNOBYL: "SO THAT I MAY TEST THEM"

*Rebbe Mordechai (Mottel) Twersky of Chernobyl was born in 5530 (1770) to his father Rebbe Menachem Nachum, the first Rebbe in the dynasty. When required to choose a surname, Rebbe Mordechai chose Twersky after the city of Tiberias, where Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk and his disciples had settled. Many chasidim gathered under his guidance, and many towns appointed him as their Maggid Meisharim (preacher of righteousness). His leadership style was characterized by wealth and expansiveness, unlike his father's custom. Nevertheless, he ate very little and derived hardly any pleasure from material matters. He passed away in Kiev on the 20th of Iyar 5597 (1837), and while still alive, he prepared his burial place on the outskirts of the village of Anatevka, saying that there were no churches there, and the sound of church bells would not disturb his rest. His eight sons served as Chasidic rebbes throughout Ukraine and were prominent in spreading the teachings of Chasidut.*

Once there was a wealthy man who had bought a large orchard from the local nobleman to plant fruit trees. He worked the land to prepare it and invested money and hard labor in the orchard. When he planted the saplings, he needed abundant rain so that the saplings would take root and his investment would not be in vain.

That year there was a drought, and the man came with a broken heart to the holy Rebbe Mottel of Chernobyl to ask him to pray that rain should fall and water his orchard. Rebbe Mottel took out a Bible and began to read from the portion of *Bechukotai*: "If you follow My statutes... I will provide your rains in their time, etc." He then said, "According to the verse, the reason that there is no rain is probably because you are not walking in God's ways, so I cannot help you." When the wealthy man heard the holy rebbe's words, he left him in despair.

After the wealthy man left, the holy rebbe went to his room to rest a bit. Just then, an old man knocked on the door, wanting to enter to see the holy rebbe. The attendant told him that the rebbe had just gone to rest, and the old man returned to his lodging. Meanwhile, Rebbe Mottel came out of his room and asked the attendant: Who was here? The attendant told him that there was an old man he

didn't recognize, and since the rebbe had gone to rest, he did not let him in. The holy rebbe ordered to call for him.

When the old man came, the Rebbe asked him where he was from, and he answered: from the city of Sassov. He asked him: Did you know the tzaddik Rebbe Moshe Leib of Sassov? He answered that he knew him and had also heard many Torah teachings from him, and the holy rebbe asked him to tell him a Torah teaching from him.

The old man said that once the holy Rebbe Moshe Leib said: It is written in the Torah, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you, day by day… so that I may test him, whether he will follow My teaching or not."[1] We should understand it as follows: For what purpose does God give someone livelihood day by day? To elevate him. "Whether he will follow My teaching or not," even if he sometimes follows the way of the Torah and sometimes not!

When the holy Rebbe heard this interpretation, he ordered to call the wealthy man to him and said to him: 'Did you hear what the tzaddik from Sassov said? That rain will fall!' The wealthy man left Rebbe Mottel happy, knowing that his salvation was near. And so it was. The windows of heaven opened, and he was saved from a great loss.

This story has all the classic ingredients of a good Chasidic story—a crisis, a pair of *tzaddikim*, a revolutionary insight into a well-known verse from the Torah, and finally a miracle inspired by this insight. These are all the components of a classic and sweet Chasidic story. Between the lines, we sense the immense spiritual and emotional effort invested by the *tzaddikim* to bring about this sweetness. As Rebbe Usher Freund once said when asked why he doesn't bless everyone who approaches him on Shabbat with Shabbat greetings: "What do you think? That saying, 'Good Shabbos' comes easily to me?"

This effort is reflected in Rebbe Mottel's retreat to his room. True, he speaks harshly with the wealthy man, but we see immediately that the words he speaks affect him no less harshly. He closes himself in his room, processing the incident and seemingly attempting to sweeten the harsh judgment. This is also how we can understand the appearance of the elderly man: Rebbe Moshe Leib of Sassov was no longer in this world, but Rebbe Mottel summoned him to participate in this task of sweetening, with the elderly *chasid* serving as a messenger. True, Rebbe Mottel had told the wealthy man that he could not help him, but together with another great tzaddik, he was able to come to the man's aid.

From the salvation that the *tzaddikim* accomplished here, we can learn that every verse in the Torah that seems to contain judgment and caveats can be sweetened through the unconditional love represented by the manna. In the Torah portion of *Bechukotai*, there is a tone of judgment even in the blessings: if you walk in the good path - you will be given

rain. If not, woe to you.

The bread from heaven sustained Israel for forty years, even when the test of their faith totally failed. It is no coincidence that this bread, which came daily, was a great sweetening for all of Israel: all those with physical defects, who were many, due to the slavery in Egypt, were healed by eating the manna so that they could receive the Torah in completeness and joy, with all 248 organs and 365 sinews in perfect health.

Much can be contemplated and derived from this, whether in the realm of trust in God or in child-rearing. We will conclude with a few allusions: The gematria of the first three words of the condition, "If you walk in My statutes" (**אִם בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלֵכוּ**) and the first three words of the sweetening, "Behold, I will rain down for you" (**הִנְנִי מַמְטִיר לָכֶם**)? The descent of the manna was accompanied by dew above and below it, and our pair of verses also add up to 1521, which is the value of "dew" (**טָל**) or "Havayah is one" (**י-הוה אֶחָד**) squared. Specifically, the request for dew, "which does not halt [even in the summer]" is a proper request, unlike the request for rain, "which does halt" when not in its time or without the appropriate conditions, thus considered an improper request. But through drawing down the dew-manna, we eventually also receive the rainfall, as needed.

Thus, the caveat and the sweetening are united through the pair of tzaddikim, and the Jewish people merit elevation and abundance.

Notes
1. Exodus 16:4.

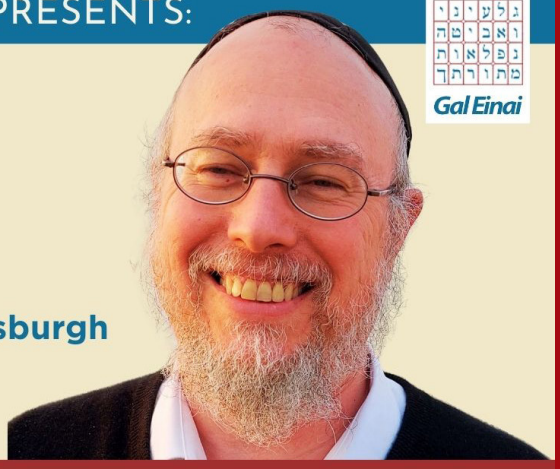
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**Secretary to HaRav Yitzchak Ginsburgh**
Senior lecturer at the School of Jewish Psychology, Jerusalem



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