

Milah: An Unnatural Covenant Rabbi Maury Grebenau

From the very beginnings of the Jewish people, circumcision has played a central role. Avrohom and his family undergo circumcision and the Seforno (Bereishis 18:1) explains that this is why Hashem appeared at the beginning of parshat VaYerah. A covenant by definition is a two-way agreement and so both parties must be present. The Seforno suggests that the chair of Eliyahu that we customarily place at a brit is to signify Hashem's presence at the event where we induct another Jew into this covenant. But what is the nature of this covenant?

Circumcision is supposed to take place specifically on the 8th day of a baby boy's life. The Maharal explains that eight is the number which is above nature. The six directions plus the point where one begins is seven which is the number of the natural world. The week and year cycles are both cycles of seven. The other nations of the world also have the capacity to have a relationship with Hashem, but it is that of seven. The covenant of circumcision is that of eight - we have the potential to relate to Hashem above the natural order.

Milah is similar to the Torah in this sense, since the Torah is above nature as well. The Torah was given to us after seven weeks, each of seven days, symbolizing that Torah is the ultimate instruction manual for overcoming our nature and relating to Hashem on a higher level. Milah too is the *tikun haTeva* (Tiferet Yisroel Ch. 2) according to the Maharal – that which symbolizes our overcoming our natures to a whole new level. This is why we perform the circumcision even on Shabbat despite the fact that drawing blood is usually not allowed. The Maharal (Chidushei Aggadot Nedarim 31) says that Shabbat is the completion of creation, the pinnacle of seven but circumcision is eight.

The Midrash (Tanchuma Tazria 5) encapsulates this point by framing a philosophical argument between Rabbi Akiva and Tornis Rufus, a senator in the Roman empire. Tornis Rufus argues that G-d's handiwork should be more pleasant than man's so if Hashem created a baby with a foreskin why would we try to "perfect" things by removing it? Rabbi Akiva responds by comparing wheat kernels to a freshly baked loaf, would Tornis Rufus argue that wheat is better to eat? He explains that Hashem gives us the mitzvot in general, and milah in particular as a symbol, for us to perfect ourselves. Here is how the Mabit, Rav Moshe ben Yosef de Trani explains it:

Mabit, Beis Elokim, Sha'ar HaTefilla Ch. 1

The purpose of man is only achieved through hard work & involvement in Torah and good deeds, for "all is in the hand of Heaven apart from the fear of Heaven" (Berachot 33a).

This is what we learn from the fact that Milah is on the eighth day after his birth, i.e. that man was not

תכלית האדם אינו מושג אלא ע"י טורח ועמל האדם בתורה ובמע"ט בזה העולם כי הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים (ברכות ל"ג).

וזו היא הוראת המילה ביום השמיני ללידתו, לומר שלא נברא האדם להתנהג על טבע

<p>born to follow the nature of the world, like the animals, but rather to work hard to perform deeds that are focused on his Maker, and to weaken any force that pulls him toward transgression – which is [represented by] the foreskin. “On the eighth day the foreskin should be severed,” demonstrating that through this he will conquer the natural order of the world, which is symbolized by seven days.</p>	<p>העולם כבעלי חיים, אלא לטרוח לפעול פעולותיו מכוונות ליוצרו, ולהחליש בידי דבר המביאו לידי עבירה, והיא הערלה, "וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו," להורות כי בזה יהיה גובר על טבע העולם, שהם שבעת הימים.</p>
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Milah celebrates this supernatural mission and covenant with Hashem. It reminds us that our entire purpose is not to simply go with the natural or societal flow but to make proactive choices to be better than our impulses and enhance the connection with Hashem that is symbolized by Milah. May Hashem give us the strength of character needed to be on a path of always seeking to perfect ourselves further and choose to be above nature.