



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeira

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Vayeira

**Three Reactions to
Circumcision**



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

What is the difference between circumcision and self-mutilation? What is the difference between sanctifying yourself and scarring yourself? Many ask, especially lately, how is circumcising an innocent eight-day-old baby different from the cruelty of child abuse throughout the world?

The difference is the source.

If a doctor instructs you to remove a threatening growth you do so. You may ask for a second opinion – and you should – and then you follow the consensus.

Now imagine if this doctor actually created you?

Abraham consulted with three of his friends. One of them gave him this advice: “Don’t you think the Creator of all your body parts knows how to best utilize them?”

Obedying the command, fulfilling the mitzvah – any mitzvah – is the most logical course of action. It is simply following the music of the Ultimate Composer.

Brit mila, circumcision, a seemingly “inhumane” act, in fact teaches us what it means to be truly human.

And to be truly human is to be divine.

THREE REACTIONS TO CIRCUMCISION: IS IT HUMANE? IS IT BARBARIC? IS IT LOGICAL?

1. An Atheist at a Bris (Joke)

At a *bris* – circumcision ceremony – Shlomo meets his old friend Izzy, whom he hasn't seen in years. After exchanging the usual amenities, they sit down to plates heaping with lox, bagels, cream cheese, pastries, eggs, muffins, pancakes, waffles, and wash it down with some schnapps and a double latte. (A *bris* is no place for dieting.)

As they are munching and imbibing, Shlomo turns to his old friend and says: "Izzy, people are telling me that you don't go to *shul* any more, you don't eat kosher anymore, you don't keep Shabbos anymore. Can it be true that you no longer believe in God?"

Izzy looks uncomfortable and hurriedly changes the subject. When the *bris* concludes, and the new child enters the covenant of Abraham, the two friends say their Mazal Tov's and head their respective ways.

The next afternoon, they bump into each other again on the street.

"You must tell me, Izzy," Shlomo says, "Is it true that you no longer believe in our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?"

Izzy replies, "Shlomo, because you are an old friend, I'll give it to you straight – a straight answer to a straight question. It is true, I no longer believe in God. I mix milk and meat, I desecrate the Shabbos, I covet, I blaspheme, you name it."

Shlomo asks, "So, why didn't you just tell me that yesterday?"

Izzy, deeply shocked, exclaims, "God forbid – at a *bris*?!"

2. Forging a Bond

The word *bris*, or *brit*, does not translate into English as "circumcision." *Brit* literally means a "covenant" or a "bond" an unwavering connection and eternal fusion with the Creator of the Universe.

The first person to forge this bond was our forefather Abraham. By circumcising himself, Abraham bonded himself to the Creator. And ever since – for almost 4,000 years – we, his offspring, have been doing the same, forging our bond with our Creator.

As my opening joke demonstrates, the brit captures the essence of the Jewish people. Even the Shabbat-desecrating, milk-and-meat mixing, coveting, blaspheming Jew is respectful when it comes to this hallowed ceremony and the everlasting bond that it creates.

But what does the *brit*, or *brit mila*, mean? What is its power? After all, no matter how eloquently circumcision is presented, it still seems to be a pretty primitive, old-fashioned, and – dare I say it – even a barbaric act. Don't many of us secretly think that?

3. A Hypothetical

And speaking about primitive and barbaric, let me ask you to imagine the following scenario:

On a hypothetical train sits an elderly Chassidic Jew in classic black-and-white garb next to a teenager who is pierced and tattooed from head to toe.

A hypothetical woman gets up on this hypothetical train and starts yelling at the hypothetical Chassidic Jew. "You Jews are despicable, barbaric, primitive. You circumcise your children, damage their skin, and scar their bodies. Shame on you and all your kin!"

This hypothetical woman then turns to the pierced and tattooed teenager: "Young man, I so respect your self-expression, your progressive attitude, the way you own your body and use it as a canvas to convey your unique personality. May you be blessed with the fortitude to always follow the beat of your colorful drum, no matter what the naysayers may naysay."

The hypothetical woman then sits down and the hypothetical train reaches its hypothetical destination.

It is true that human beings maintain their robust prejudices. If a man eats only kosher, it is deemed archaic and dogmatic, but if a new-age yoga-pant-wearing life-coach eats only kale muffins, it is considered trendy and cleansing. If a married woman desires to cover her hair, it is deemed demeaning and prejudicial, but if an artist wishes to shave off half her hair and dye the other half pink, it is lauded and imitated.

So, too, circumcision. If a rebel were to place one of those disks in his ear, creating a portal big enough to drive a car through, it is perceived as a statement of self-expression. But if a tiny piece of skin is removed in a circumcision ceremony, there is a global outcry.

4. Off the Wall

True, today, in many civilized countries, circumcision is considered a healthy norm. But, trust me, when God first told Abraham of this idea, it was completely off the wall.

And, if you think about it, it still pretty much is. So let me ask you: Why is circumcision considered such a holy act, so essential of Judaism?

In general, we know that the Torah prohibits blemishing one's body in any possible way – no self-scarring or tattooing, never mind deleting a piece of the body's anatomy. Why then the mitzvah of the *brit*?

And if, for whatever reason, God does require and desire a bond of the flesh, why did He specifically choose that sensitive region of the human body?

5. The Specs: Ridiculous or Rational?

When any mitzvah is delivered to us by God, we look at its specs – what does it consist of. So when we look at the *brit mila*, we find the whole thing ridiculously perplexing. We, as rational human beings, simply don't get it.

Granted, it is not the only perplexing mitzvah. Tell me, do you get why it is prohibited to mix wool and linen together? Or milk and meat? Do you get why it is terrible for a Jew to eat pig but pretty routine for a Jew to be pigheaded?

But that brings us to another question: Why do we find these commandments so puzzling (if not completely ridiculous)?

Let me offer two possible answers: 1) Either we don't get it because the mitzvah is, in fact, completely ridiculous, or 2) we don't get it because our minds are ridiculously limited and finite.

So I submit to you that, when perceived through the correct lens, every mitzvah is the most rational, sensible, normal thing a human being could do. And that is what we are going to learn now from that seemingly most radical and ridiculous of all – the *brit mila*.

6. Parshat Vayeira

This week's Torah reading, *Parshat Vayeira*, opens with Abraham in post-*brit* recovery. Abraham circumcised himself in last week's reading and now he is recuperating at home. (Evidently his insurance also did not cover that rehabilitation facility.) While he is in this fragile state, God appears to him:

Now the Lord appeared to him in the groves of Mamre, as he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.¹

We know that God doesn't exactly appear very often. (Just ask Richard Dawkins.) When God does decide to make a revealed appearance, why does God choose to appear to Abraham specifically in the groves of Mamre, of all places?

¹ Genesis 18:1.

7. Midrashic Tale

By way of explanation, the Midrash² shares this tale:

After God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, Abraham went to consult with three of his confidants if this really was the correct course of action. Abraham was doing due-diligence before performing surgery on a pretty delicate part of his body, a part from which, incidentally, the future of the Jewish people were destined to spring. He wasn't merely concerned with himself – he wanted to make sure he was doing the right thing for all future generations.

There's nothing wrong with consulting. First of all, it helps you share God's word; second of all, it helps you understand what exactly God is asking of you. Due diligence even – or maybe especially – when it comes to spiritual matters is not a bad thing at all. It is better to address and analyze a commandment than to blindly act.

The three confidants – named Aner, Eshkol and Mamre – are described as *baalei brit Avram*, “the confederates of Abram's bond.”³

First Abraham comes to Aner, seeking his advice regarding circumcision. Aner says: “Abraham, you are basically a hundred years old, so it is probably not the healthiest thing in the world for you to be circumcising yourself. Go relax. You have done enough already – you have brought monotheism to the planet. I don't think self-surgery is a risk worth taking. I do not recommend circumcising yourself and compromising your health. Even Adam, the first human, the handiwork of God Himself, was uncircumcised!”

Next, Abraham goes to Eshkol, who offers the following advice: “You have many enemies, specifically those four powerful kings you vanquished in Sodom. If you were to circumcise yourself you would be ailing, weakened and unable to flee or defend yourself if attacked. I do not recommend circumcising yourself and compromising your safety.”

² Bereishit Rabba 42:14; Agadat Beresihit 19:3; Tanchuma, Vayeira 3.

³ Genesis 14:13.

Finally, Abraham consults with Mamre who minces no words: “God asked you to circumcise yourself and you hesitate? The same God who formed all your body parts, and protected every single one of your limbs up till now, asks you to commit one little part to Him, and you stand debating whether or not you should do so? Come on Abe, you know better.”

When God heard Mamre’s advice to Abraham, God said: “Because you gave Abraham such good advice to circumcise himself, I will immortalize you by revealing Myself in the groves of Mamre – not on Aner’s home turf, not in Eshkol’s, but on yours.”

What does this teach us?

8. Mamre’s Advice

Mamre’s advice to Abraham defined the very notion of a mitzvah. Mamre framed the mitzvah in such a natural way that anyone who would not perform it would be completely insane. Before Mamre, circumcision was ridiculous and completely radical; after Mamre, not doing it was ridiculous and completely radical.⁴

Mamre essentially told Abraham that either God is real or He is not real. There is no in-between.

It’s like going to a doctor. If you trust your doctor and your doctor tells you to take a certain medication or to perform a certain procedure, you do so. Sure, you may consult with another professional, with friends and family, get a second opinion, but at the end of the day, you will heed the good doc’s advice.

Now imagine if that doctor actually created you from scratch.

⁴ Indeed, some Midrashim relate that Mamre actually circumcised himself first as an example of adhering to God (Midrash Hagadol, Bereishit 17:23; Otzar Midrashim 165).

If you believe that there is a God who created you, all of you, then it is ridiculous to contradict that same God when He instructs you to dedicate a piece of your skin to Him. Don't you think God knows what He's doing when He asks you to remove a part of yourself? Don't you think that when God asks you to circumcise yourself it is for your own good?

Now, if you think that God is like a bad doctor, then circumcision is probably not the way to go. But Abraham didn't have such ungodly sentiments. And neither should any Jew who is Abraham's offspring.

9. Believe It or Not

If you do not believe in God, if you do not believe that a Creator created the body and gifted it to you in all its brilliant perfection, then sure it would be completely ridiculous to circumcise yourself and tamper with such a delicate part of the human anatomy. But if you believe that there is a Creator that created your entire body, and every one of your limbs is a gift, then what's the big deal if you dedicate one part of one limb to the Creator when He asks you to?

Mamre's advice to Abraham fundamentally defined the Jew's relationship with his or her Creator: If you believe in God then you do everything God asks of you.

When push comes to shove, God is everything. This is what Mamre was telling Abraham. And this is what we, Abraham's offspring, are taught.

And here we are, some 3,700 years after Mamre's advice and Abraham's circumcision. The advice, and the circumcision, didn't work out so bad, now did it?

10. Why Circumcision of All Things?

But there is one more question that remains:

Why was this bond between God and Abraham sealed on that particular part of the body? Why circumcision of all things?

God has given us certain gifts, certain abilities, certain energies and potentials unique to us as human beings. These are exemplified by our ability to create. Our ability to give life, cherish it, and protect it makes us divine, divine human beings created in the divine image.

But there is a flip side: our abilities to create also allow us to destroy. Just as we can bring beautiful children into this world, we have the terrible capacity to harm, abuse and kill them. And we see this more often than is bearable (especially now with radical Islam sweeping the globe).

So yes, God could have created Abraham as perfect – he could have been born already circumcised. But God didn't do so because God wanted Abraham and all of his offspring to make a bond with him, affirming that every creative and reproductive power that has been gifted to them may never, ever be used for the opposite ends. Man may create life, but never destroy it; man may only use the divine ability to create sacred moments, but not profanity and evil.

This is the *brit* and this is what we Jews represent. And if this is not completely logical, I do not know what is.

11. Creative Abilities

We have been gifted with the divine ability to create – and this ability is represented by our reproductive functions.

To ensure that this divine ability is utilized divinely, God created a *brit*, a bond, a sign that always reminds us of our purpose in creating, and never allows us to use our abilities to destroy.

In response, we could say to God, “Listen, I am getting up there in years, this just isn't for me.” This is what Aner advised.

Or we could say, “This won't make me stronger but weaker. This bond will limit my movement and cramp my style.” This was Eshkol's reaction.

Or we could adopt the attitude of Mamre and go for it.

Indeed, the three responses of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre parallel the three ways we respond to the challenges – and opportunities – of life.

Aner's response is the comfortable response: It is risky to try something new, so better not to.

Eshkol's response is the self-preservation response: The world will attack you if you are too different. A mitzvah weakens you in the eyes of your neighbors, and it wouldn't be wise to do that.

Mamre's response is to trust in God and, even if it seems uncomfortable at first, in the end, all will be well.

I mean, if you are given an uncomfortable challenge by God, a monumental task by the Creator of the Universe, you are sure to grow from it!

Do you think that keeping kosher is so that you should eat less? Maybe keeping kosher is so that you can connect to the things you consume more. Do you think Shabbat is so that you can work less? Maybe Shabbat is so that you can remember why you work in the first place. Do you think the laws of marriage, Jewish home, and family purity are in place to restrain you? Maybe they are in place to show you how beautiful love really is.

A mitzvah isn't simply an act of goodness or kindness or holiness. A mitzvah is the Creator of the Universe sharing with you the secret how to optimize your experience here on this planet.

Sure you can heed Aner's advice and basically cease living. Or you can listen to Eshkol who says to follow the conventions of the world that dictate that certain challenges will weaken you and make you less.

Or you can follow Mamre's logic, which says: "You trusted the Creator with the creation of your body; it would probably also be wise to trust Him with how to best experience that body. You trusted the Creator with your creation; it would probably also be wise to trust Him with how to best experience that creation."

This advice is immortalized in the first verse of our Torah portion – *Now the Lord appeared to him in the groves of Mamre.*

Immortal advice indeed.

12. Body Language (Conclusion)

Precisely because this would be the eternal bond did it have to take place upon the part of us that is most contrarian, most destructive but also most productive.

The body part that is most productive can also be the most destructive. The part of us that is most sacred can also be the most profane. The part of us that is most essential can also be made the most superficial.

This is what God is telling us. Ensure that your profundity is never watered-down, that your depth is never made shallow, that your ability to create is never mistaken for a disability that destroys.

If you trust that God created the human body, then you can also trust that God instructed us how to best utilize this body.

Every Jew knows, trusts and believes this on an essential level. It's only that sometimes we forget or ignore it. *Brit mila* is the eternal bond, the everlasting reminder that we are not here to destroy, to be profane or shallow, but that we are here to create, to be holy and profound.

Mamre's perspective made it all so sensible. To Abraham ... and to all of us, now and forever.

Shabbat Shalom!