

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 25: Ethical issues in Tanach 3 - Circumcision

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Throughout Jewish history, empires and governments have questioned the practice of *brit milah* (circumcision). The Hellenist King Antiochus (d. 164 BCE) explicitly banned *brit milah* during the period of the Maccabee revolt. Later, the Roman Emperor Hadrian (d. 138 CE) proscribed it during the Roman exile.

More recently, legal threats have been made to religious circumcision in many countries. MilahUK (www.milahuk.org) has worked tirelessly to defend *brit milah* in the face of attacks from a variety of sources.

Our study focuses on the deeper meaning behind *brit milah*. Why did God choose this act in particular to form His covenant with Avraham, and why does it only apply to boys, not girls?

The last two articles discussed how the tests that Avraham endured and passed all involved accepting God's demands even though, at least to human logic and conscience, they appeared immoral. In the words of Israeli engineer and author, Rabbi Mois Navon: "He [Avraham] was told to go to a new land but then forced to leave it; he was told he would have children but then found his wife to be barren. Despite this and more, he persevered in his mission, both out of a sense of purposive commitment to an invaluable lifework and out of an unshakeable belief in the God who chose him" (*Hakirah: the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought Volume 17* p. 244).

Similarly, Rabbi David Kimche (known as the Radak, d. 1235) notes the illogical nature of God pledging to Avraham that he would become the "father of many nations" (Bereishit 17:4) and then commanding him that the covenant would

be fulfilled through *brit milah*, which seemingly weakens the very part of himself that was essential in actualising this promise.

Yet perhaps this is the very paradigm of our people, whose continuity throughout the generations in the face of horrific adversity is seemingly illogical. Given the bitter exiles, anti-Semitic persecutions, physical violence and spiritual assaults we have suffered, by all logic our people should not exist. Yet God's promise that the Jewish people will endure still holds true (see Yirmiyahu 46:28 and *Chiddushei HaGriz* 209).

Nonetheless, every child needs both a father and a mother, so why did God only require Avraham, and subsequently all Jewish boys, to make an active commitment to His covenant?

Even though both men and women are vital for producing a child, only men are specifically obligated to fulfil the commandment to 'be fruitful and multiply'. Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (known as the Meshech Chochma, d. 1926) explains that women are exempt from the commandment to procreate, because unlike men, women endure great discomfort during pregnancy and pain during childbirth. God would not demand something which is physically painful, as this would violate the concept of *derache'a darchei noam*, meaning "the Torah's paths are paths of pleasantness" (Mishlei 3:17). Consequently, since only Avraham was obligated to have children, only he and all Jewish males after him must perform a specific act to enter God's covenant.

Nevertheless, *brit milah* represents not only Avraham's covenant with God, but our endurance as a people for all eternity.