

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

that people are incapable of doing. Ask about something people can also do.' Immediately, Turnus Rufus asked about *brit milah* – circumcision. Rabbi Akiva said: 'I knew you were going to ask me about that and that's why I responded to you that human deeds are greater than those of God. Let me give you an example.' Rabbi Akiva brought some stalks of wheat and some cookies and asked rhetorically: 'Which of these are the works of God and which were made by people?' And then he asked: 'Which are nicer, namely which would you rather eat?' Turnus Rufus then asked: 'So if God wanted *brit milah* so much, why aren't boys born circumcised?' Rabbi Akiva replied: 'I could just as easily have asked you why people are born with the umbilical cord still attached, but I will answer your question anyway. God gave us *brit milah* to teach us that the commandments are given to us to perfect ourselves.' - Based on Tanhuma Tazria 5

In this story, Turnus Rufus picks a fight with Rabbi Akiva. He asks a seemingly innocent question, but his true target is *brit milah*. He argues that God's creation is perfect, and circumcision an unnatural act of defacement. Rabbi Akiva counters that many of God's most important natural gifts require human interaction to achieve their highest form. Many delicious foods are only edible when worked over, treated, and/or cooked. Cotton and wool require significant processing before they become the cloth from which beautiful clothing is made. All humans may be born attached to an umbilical cord, but we don't treat cutting it as disfigurement of the newborn, nor do we outlaw cutting a child's hair or fingernails, or even piercing their ears (which also causes momentary pain). We are given our bodies, just like everything else in the natural world, but we are also given instruction, Torah, that tell us how to care for and elevate ourselves and the world.

His argument may not have been enough to convince the Romans to start performing circumcisions, but that was not its goal. By pitting the virtuous Rabbi Akiva against a known enemy of the Jews, the story was obviously intended for internal Jewish consumption - a way of reconciling our ancient practice with the mores of the time in order to shore up Jewish commitment to the mitzvah. But in so doing, Midrash Tanhuma added a layer of meaning to *brit milah* that serves as a paradigm for all of Judaism. The world is a work in progress, and we are God's partners. Only through our activity, guided by Torah, can we and the world be refined, beautified, and perfected.

For Discussion: How do you relate to *brit milah*? What do you find meaningful and/or problematic about it? How compelling do you find Rabbi Akiva's argument, or the entire idea of Torah being a guide for perfecting ourselves and the world?



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Tazria & Metsora

April 21, 2018 | 6 Iyyar 5778

Annual | Leviticus 12:1-15:33 (Etz Hayim p. 649-670; Hertz p. 460-477)
 Triennial Leviticus 13:40-14:32 (Etz Hayim p. 657-663; Hertz p. 464-473)
 Haftarah | 2 Kings 7:3-20 (Etz Hayim p. 675-678; Hertz p. 477-479)

D'var Torah: Partners in Creation

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

A day does not go by where we don't hear reports out of this European capital or that about legislation to outlaw infant circumcision. This act (*milah*), which is a sign of our covenant (*brit*) with God, has a long history in our tradition, going all the way back to Avraham: "And when his son Yitzchak was eight days old, Avraham circumcised him, as God had commanded." (Bereishit 21:4) Circumcision, however, does not come up as a commandment for all Jews until Parashat Tazria: "And on the eighth day, the flesh of the foreskin should be circumcised." (VaYikra 12:3) In this particular passage, the Torah offers us a commandment but does not seek to justify or explain it.

The challenges from the outside world to this act are not a new phenomenon, and not a few Jews were influenced by the arguments condemning it. In part because of these challenges, and in order to justify the commandment for themselves, the sages took upon themselves the task of explaining circumcision's significance. Midrash Tanhuma relates a very interesting conversation between a certain wicked Roman ruler, named Turnus Rufus, and Rabbi Akiva which sought to explain why Jews practice circumcision:

Taunting Rabbi Akiva, Turnus Rufus asked: 'Whose deeds are nicer, God's or those of human beings?' Rabbi Akiva responded: 'Those of people are nicer.' Turnus Rufus replied: 'But how can that be, can a human being create the world?' Rabbi Akiva said: 'Don't make a comparison with things

D'var Haftarah: Miraculous Salvation

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This week's haftarah portrays the miraculous rescue of four lepers trapped between the invading army of Aram (Syria) and the besieged inhabitants of the city of Samaria. We are privy to the thoughts of these lepers as they contemplate their possible actions, whether to join their brethren inside the city or to fall on the mercy of the attacking army. In the end, they choose the latter option but are miraculously saved: "For the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army, so that they said to one another, 'Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite and Egyptian kings to attack us!' And they rose and fled..." (6-7) The lepers found the enemy camp abandoned on account of a totally imagined threat. The imposed famine on the city was now over.

How is one to account for the threatening noises God had caused the Arameans to hear? The text of the story leaves that to our imaginations. But the rabbinic sages, textual virtuosi with an incredible ability to make wondrous associations between one biblical text and another, searched for an answer elsewhere in Scripture. Midrash Tanhuma (Va'era 15) found an answer in the Torah's description of Moses stopping the plague of hail that God had imposed upon the Egyptians: "And Moses went out from Pharaoh's presence out of the city and spread out his hands to the Lord, and the thunder stopped and the hail and no rain came pouring down on the earth." (Exodus 9:33) The midrash imagines God taking this mass of thunder and hail and setting it aside for later: "When did they (the thunder and hail) fall? In the days of Elisha (the prophet) on the camp of Aram." According to this midrash, God saved what remained of this plague, and then used it years hundreds of years later it to save the lepers!

This "fanciful" explanation may induce a smile or an eye-roll, but what is important to note is how the midrash connects the story of the lepers to one of God's truly great acts of redemption. A national wonder (the plagues) is used to save four helpless individuals who, in turn, become the agents of redemption for the entire city. This chain of events, as envisioned by these sages, illustrates the transformative power of faith. Individuals inspired by great miracles of salvation can become agents of salvation themselves - a particularly powerful message following Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtzma'ut.

For Discussion: How has the Jewish story of salvation and liberation inspired others to be a source of good in the world? How does it inspire you?

Parashat Tazria & Metsora Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Following the painful event of the death of 2 of Aaron's sons during the celebrations for inaugurating the Priesthood, we are taking a double-parasha (1 week) break from Kohanim in the Tabernacle and learning a bit about purity. Purity is a state that can change, it has nothing to do with hygiene.

1) As blood and similar bodily discharges renders a person impure, a woman who has given birth is naturally impure. How long is she impure if she gives birth to a boy (12:2-5)? How long for a girl? Why do you think that this particular length of time was chosen for a boy? (There might be a hint in the text.)

2) A person who notices certain skin blemishes developing might suspect he has *Tzara'at* (known as leprosy, but not the illness known by that name today). Who determines if it is indeed *Tzara'at* (13:1-3)?

3) While the Torah gives many details about *Tzara'at*, it does not tell us why it happens. Why do you think that people, their clothing, and their houses might develop physical signs of *Tzara'at*?

4a) The Midrash Tanhuma contemplated question 3 (above), and answered: *Tzara'at* comes because of several causes, among them "...Theft, *Lashon Hara* (speaking badly of another person)...entering a domain that is not yours...causing fights among brothers..." What do these things seem to share?

4b) Delving a little deeper: What in the nature of *Tzara'at* pushed the Midrash away from assuming that it was simply a physically contagious ailment from whom that public should be protected? How would the Midrash define *Tzara'at*? Based on this, why is it the Kohen that defines one's status?

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