

G-d Knows What Is Best For You

Abraham and his wife attracted many followers to Judaism. What happened to them, and what is the message we can take from circumcision?

Utility of Circumcision

Several years ago, the World Health Organization published a study of the war on HIV, particularly in Africa, where countless die of HIV every year. The study revealed that male circumcision lowered rates of infection by 60%—meaning, a circumcised male in Africa has a 60% less likelihood of getting infected or infecting others with HIV.

If anyone questioned the utility of circumcision, this study once again proves that circumcision is good for human health.

Abraham's Converts

In our Torah portion we read about Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham, who at the very beginning of the portion is told "*Lech I'cha*, go out for yourself."

The Torah tells us that Avraham took along his wife Sarai—this was before G-d changed her name to Sarah—and his nephew Lot "and the souls they had made in Charan." Explaining this last phrase, Rashi explains, "they brought them under the wings of the Divine Presence: Avraham converted the men and Sarai

converted the women.” Avraham and Sarah had many adherents who followed them, men and women whom they had successfully convinced that there is a Creator of the Universe.

The question, then, must be asked: What happened to those people? Why are they not part of the Jewish nation? To where did they disappear? When? And why?

The Midrash states that when G-d told Avraham to circumcise himself (at the end of our Torah portion), Avraham was worried about how the world would react. Says the Midrash: “Avraham said: ‘Before I was circumcised, all nationalities would come and cling to me. Do you claim that after my circumcision they will come and cling to me?!’”

Perhaps the above Midrash reveals the secret of the lost “souls made in Charan.”

When they heard about G-d’s commandment for circumcision – and they saw the mohel coming and sharpening the knife, they bolted—they decided it wasn’t compatible with their lifestyles and certainly not something they were interested in. As long as the issue was philosophical and intellectual, as long as it was about whether there was or wasn’t a G-d, it was all fine and good. But the moment talk started of “a sign in the flesh,” it became something else entirely.

His True Desire

What really bothered them?

There is a well-known law of *gittin*, Jewish divorce, which rules that when a husband wants to divorce his wife, both must

agree—meaning, he must want to hand her a divorce and she must want to get one.

What happens in a case where a husband is ordered by the Jewish court (Bet Din) to divorce his wife but he doesn't want to? Maimonides (Laws of Divorce 5:20) writes: "He is beaten until he says: I want to." Meaning, he is forced to say that he wants to give a divorce, and it's still considered a valid divorce.

What is the logic behind this? Maimonides goes on to provide a very interesting explanation: "A husband who doesn't want to divorce still wants to remain part of the Jewish nation and wants to do all the mitzvos and distance himself from the transgressions. However, he is overpowered by his own human nature... when he is rebuked until his human nature is weakened and he says 'I want to,' he is considered to have provided the divorce willingly."

What Maimonides is saying here is that deep at heart, every single Jew wants to do what Torah says to do. But we all have that human nature which sometimes drives us crazy, that "foolish spirit" that tells us not to listen to that inner voice pushing us to do the right thing. Thus, by forcing the hand of the recalcitrant husband, we are actually helping him do the right thing. That's why it's considered a valid divorce when he says "I want to" even though he's being forced to—because deep within his heart he really does want, even if he doesn't know it at the moment.

Your Opinion is Unnecessary

This law teaches us that Judaism's philosophy is that G-d knows

what's best for you and that He doesn't need your opinion.

This philosophy began with the mitzvah of circumcision.

G-d told Avraham that every eight-day-old child must be circumcised. It seems to be a frightful commandment! We are taking an infant, a human being who cannot make independent decisions, and irreversibly “mutilating” him for life. As a matter of fact, there are many people who are angry at their parents for circumcising them without their consent—and there have even been lawsuits where parents were sued in court for circumcising their child.

This was the objection of all of Avraham's disciples. They were prepared to accept that there is a G-d as a philosophical concept—but they couldn't accept the idea of circumcising an eight-day-old baby.

But it is specifically this mitzvah that captures all of Judaism: the idea that the Torah resolves what is best for you; that there is something higher than your personal opinion.

Occasionally a deceased person requests cremation before passing, and afterwards, family members come to me with their dilemma: on the one hand, they want to carry out the deceased's final request, but on the other hand, they know that Judaism prohibits it—and they don't know what to do. I tell them as follows: When the deceased was born he was not asked whether he wants a circumcision: rather, his father had it done because he believed it was the best thing for him. The same thing applies here: we don't need to act according to his request but rather, according to what we did at his birth: what's

best for him as Judaism defines it, which is to bury him by Jewish law.

My friends, people tell me many times that “I asked my son and he doesn’t want to go to Hebrew School, and I don’t want to force him to do something he doesn’t want.”

The mitzvah of circumcision teaches us that from your first breath, you simply do what G-d wants. One day you will understand that it is what is best for you.