

Bris or Bar Mitzvah?

Category: Bereishis, Vayeira

Why do we celebrate a Bar Mitzvah more than a Bris, and what does it tell us about the deeper meaning of those events?

Isaac's Bris, Bar Mitzvah and Wedding

Why is it that bar mitzvahs are celebrated so lavishly while the events accompanying other milestones like a bris or even a wedding often pale in comparison?

In our Parsha we read about both a bris and a bar mitzvah. Here too, we find a big party for the bar mitzvah but we don't find anything written about a celebration for the bris. The Torah tells about the first Jewish child ever to be circumcised in one sentence, "And Abraham circumcised Isaac his son as G-d commanded."

But then the Torah tells us about the bar mitzvah of Isaac, "And the boy grew up and was weaned (from his Yetzer Horah - Midrash) and Abraham made a great feast on the day of Isaac's bar mitzvah." The party that Abraham made was indeed impressive. In attendance were the spiritual leaders of the generation, Shem and Ever, as well as the political leaders such as Avimelech the king of the Philistines, Og the king of Bashan, as well as Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, all men of great power and influence. All of the great men of the time were invited to the event.

We don't even hear about a great feast at the wedding of Isaac. Isaac's marriage is related in great detail in the Torah, but the actual ceremony seems to have been done without any ceremony at all.

Who's Covenant? - Bris

So, what is more important in Judaism: a bris or a bar mitzvah?

One would think that the bris is more significant. Circumcision is itself a mitzvah and a Jew of any age who was not circumcised by his father as a child is obligated

to have himself circumcised. A Jew who is not circumcised is excluded from many aspects of Judaism. (Thirteen covenants were made between G-d and the Jewish people over the blood of the Bris Milah!) And what is a bar mitzvah? It's nothing special! You get an aliyah to the Torah and you make a party! So why it is that anyone I meet proudly tells me, "I was bar mitzvahed!" Why aren't Jews more enthusiastic about their bris?

The Rebbe explains that the bris is the covenant from G-d to the Jew (and not from the Jew to G-d). By circumcising his son, a father is not entering the child into a covenant with G-d. No, it is G-d who is engraving His covenant in the flesh of the child, as an everlasting symbol of G-d's ownership of this Jewish child. It's not man's covenant - it is G-d's.

This, by the way, is the reason for the bris taking place on the eight day from the baby's birth and not at thirteen, because it doesn't matter whether the person agrees or even knows what's happening or not; it's not his covenant.

Who's Covenant? - Bar Mitzvah

The bar mitzvah is another story entirely. What is the first mitzvah a bar mitzvah boy is obligated to do? (The first thing that comes to mind is Tefillin: but here we are referring to the very first mitzvah that a Bar or Bat mitzvah child has the opportunity to perform as an adult.

The Rebbe explains that the very first mitzvah for a newly bar mitzvahed child is to recite the Shema at nightfall of their birthday. The Shema Yisrael represents the Jew's acceptance of G-d's sovereignty and the Ve'ahavta is the Jew's acceptance of mitzvos. In other words, the first thing a Jew does upon becoming a bar mitzvah is to accept the responsibility of being connected to G-d to the point of self-sacrifice, which is the whole idea of the Shema prayer.

In simple terms: The bar mitzvah is the day when a Jew makes his own covenant with G-d. At eight days it was G-d who chose him; now it is he who is choosing G-d.

With this in mind, children need a lot of training before they become beholden to G-d. From the day they begin to speak their very first words, children must be trained to recite blessings before eating food, and to recite the Shema before

going to sleep. As they grow, they must be taught to pray and to study Torah and Judaism, and of course how to don Tefillin. For on this day the children will choose, of their own free will, to accept the responsibility of living a Jewish life.

The Historical Bris & Bar Mitzvah

Now we know why we don't make such big deal about our bris. We had nothing to do with it! By the bris we "became Jewish" so to speak, but at the bar mitzvah we agreed to live a Jewish life! Now that is indeed a truly great milestone.

The order of these stages is as old as Judaism itself. At the birth of our nation G-d commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and his child, to make a bris. For hundreds of years the bris milah was the only Mitzvah that Jews were commanded to do, until Mt. Sinai. At Sinai, what you could call the Jewish people's bar mitzvah took place. It was then that they agreed to do the mitzvos; and when they said "Na'aseh Venishmah" that was their "Shema Yisrael".

Of course, in good traditional fashion the brissim were done unceremoniously, while Matan Torah, the Bar Mitzvah, was done with such commotion that the whole world felt the reverberations. They got the ultimate D.J. who made crashing thunder with special effects like fire and lightening. And they celebrated with all the wonderful things we have at our bar mitzvahs.

And that is why we make such a big deal about a bar mitzvah.

One final point: The joy that comes along with a bar mitzvah is not reserved for the boy and his family. Every time a boy or girl reaches the bar/bat mitzvah age there is cause for the entire Jewish nation and indeed the entire world to rejoice. For now there will be one more Jew in the world studying Torah and performing mitzvos. All Jews are responsible for each other, and we are all working together at the same job of making this world a dwelling place for G-d, so, every time there is a bar/bat mitzvah another worker has joined the force, and the more workers there are, the faster we will get the job done.

Now that's worth celebrating! Mazal Tov!