

# Circumcision—Public or Private

Category: Bereishis, Vayeira

*Who was Avraham's PR firm, and what did they advise regarding circumcision?*

## The Advisory Board

Good Shabbos!

Every once in a while, there is a controversy about circumcision. In 2012, for example, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, himself a Jew, tried to change certain customs connected to bris milah (circumcision) that Jews have observed throughout all the generations. Similar things play out every once in a while in one country or another.

And this controversy is connected to this week's Torah portion.

But first, let's go back a bit.

At the end of last week's Parshah, we read about how G-d commanded Avraham to circumcise himself, along with his son and his entire household.

Avraham the Ivri (the Hebrew) believed in one G-d, and he spread the belief in G-d to everyone passing by. And he did this in a world in which virtually everyone served idols. The entire world was against him. But despite that, he succeeded to influence three important people: Aneir, Eshkol and Mamrei, getting them to also believe in G-d. This trio was Avraham's group of devotees.

The Midrash tells us that when Avraham first heard the command from G-d to do a circumcision, he immediately convened a meeting with his "cabinet"—Aneir, Eshkol and Mamrei. He asked them what they thought. As the Midrash puts it, "Avraham had three beloved ones... he went to get advice from them. Aneir said to him, 'He wants to make you handicapped, so that the relatives of the kings whom you killed can come and kill you, and you won't be able to run away from them.'" Aneir argued that circumcision was dangerous security-wise—that the very moment he circumcised himself, he'd become weak and he'd lose his deterrent capacity. His enemies wouldn't be afraid of him and they'd get the

strength to attack him.

## Mohel or Doctor?

Eshkol spoke from a health point of view and told Avraham that he would bleed to death if he circumcises himself at such an old age.

The Midrash continues: “Mamrei said to him: ‘With this matter you ask for advice?! Did He not save you from the fiery furnace? Do as He commands!’” Mamrei advised him as a Chasid would: What is this asking questions in the first place?! G-d saved you from the fiery furnace and did so many miracles for you, so if He tells you to do something, then what is the question at all?

This is hinted in the words at the beginning of this week’s Parshah: “And G-d appeared to him on the plains of Mamrei,” on which Rashi comments, “He [Mamrei] was the one who gave him advice about circumcision.”

But this Midrash is very strange: Avraham Avinu himself, the great believer who was ready to leap into a fiery furnace and be incinerated alive for his faith, and well before G-d revealed himself to him, gets confused and has doubts and needs to go out and get advice when G-d explicitly commands him to circumcise himself?!

The commentators explain that Avraham certainly had no doubt that he would circumcise himself as G-d had commanded. However, he had “technical” questions.

He came to get advice from his three devotees whether he should do the circumcision “discreetly or publicly.” Avraham Avinu had dedicated his entire life to spreading faith in the Creator of the Universe, and in this, he succeeded. And so he came to ask his “PR consultants” whether doing a circumcision would be something that would alienate people from him, as in those days no one had done a circumcision and the entire issue sounded insane.

Or, on the other hand, it might be worth doing it publicly—because it would influence others to do the same thing. In other words, the question was whether to do it by a doctor in an operating room, or in a synagogue with the participation of the entire community and a huge celebration.

Now, Aneir and Eshkol argued that it wasn't worth publicizing (because it could be dangerous, among other reasons). But Mamrei told him, do it and G-d will protect you—and, on the contrary, it will motivate more people to also do it.

Indeed, Avraham circumcised himself “in the midst of this day”—“in the essence of the day” at 12:00 noon. And everyone attended that particular bris. And ever since, we've had the custom to try to make a circumcision with as large a crowd as possible.

The commentators add to this, saying that Avraham also had another question. G-d had commanded him to circumcise his every “household-born and money-acquired,” and so Avraham also asked his “PR consultants” how he'd succeed in convincing them to be circumcised, too. What would make them agree to do something that never had been heard of before?

So Mamrei told him, you be the first one, and they'll see a living example. You circumcise yourself, and then your son Yishmael, and then, when they see both of you doing it, they will also agree to do it. And so it indeed was—“In the midst of this day, Avraham and his son Yishmael were circumcised, and only after that do we read, “And all the men of his household were circumcised with him.”

But the third question that Avraham asked his “cabinet” was the most difficult question of all.

G-d had told him, “Circumcise for yourselves every male”—but He had not specified to Avraham what part of the body to cut. The Torah does not tell us which limb is involved. And so Avraham went to get advice from his friends. Mamrei told him that since G-d had said, “Circumcise for yourselves every *male*,” He means the place that differentiates between female and male.” (Daas Zikeinim on the Parshah.)

## How to Influence

Why did Avraham have more questions with this mitzvah than all the other mitzvos?

The Sifsei Chachamim explains that with every other mitzvah, if you don't do it right the first time, then you can do it right the next time. But with bris milah, it's

a mitzvah that's done once in a lifetime...

The Rebbe explains (Hisvaduyos 5750, Vol. I. pg. 359, note 58) that the reason that Avraham went to ask them was so that the nations of the world would also agree to it. It's clear that Avraham had every intention to go through with his circumcision. But the fact that he called his friends to a meeting and asked them personally about it was to influence them so that they, too, would do it. And this is true also for our days—we appoint people to the board of the synagogue not just to hear their opinions, but mainly to get them to be active and involved partners in all the action.

And indeed, on the verse, “And Sarah died in Kiryas Arba,” the Midrash says, “And why is it called Kiryas Arba? ... Because four righteous people were circumcised there: Avraham, Aneir, Eshkol and Mamrei” (Midrash Rabbah 58:4).

We see from here that ultimately, even Aneir and Eshkol, who had opposed the idea, circumcised themselves. And ever since then, to this very day, Jews keep the mitzvah of bris milah with joy and en masse—exactly like Avraham Avinu.