



# Hazing

*What is the meaning of a bris, and why do we read about it on Rosh Hashanah?*

## Hazing

This week, I had the pleasure of attending my grandson's bris in Athens, Ohio, where my daughter and son-in-law, Rabbi Levi Raichik, are shluchim at Ohio University.

At the start of the ceremony, my son-in-law asked the students how many of them had ever been to a bris before. Out of around 75 students, only three or four raised their hands! So, he used the moment to explain why we even have a bris. If G-d wanted men to be circumcised, why not just create them that way?

He summed it up in a single word that everyone understood: "Hazing."

In American universities, there are student groups called fraternities and sororities. Most of these are single-gender—fraternities for men, sororities for women—and they create strong, lifelong connections. Members often stick together and support each other for years. About a hundred years ago, Jewish fraternities were also started at universities to strengthen the bonds among Jewish students, and they really took off.

But getting into these groups isn't automatic. You've got to go through initiation rituals, and only if you make it through, are you accepted. It usually starts with a "hazing period," where the older members put the new recruits through all kinds of challenges—some of them painful or embarrassing—to see how committed they are. This process is called "hazing."

My son-in-law explained that becoming part of the Jewish people has its own version of hazing. Just like in the army, where you need to

pass grueling tests to get into an elite unit, only those who make it through are admitted.

The big difference, though, is that in these cases—whether it's students or soldiers—they choose to join these groups. But being part of the Jewish people isn't something you choose (unless you're a convert). You're chosen to be born Jewish. Just like no one asks you if you want to be born at all, no one asks if you want to be born Jewish.

Even though being born Jewish is a gift, there's still a "hazing process"—and that's the bris. The custom is to do the bris without anesthesia because, as the Rebbe explained, "the pain is an essential part of the mitzvah of bris milah" (Likkutei Sichot, vol. 10, p. 48). That pain isn't just for show—it's meant to toughen us up so that later on in life, we can handle other mitzvot that might require effort, or even a little discomfort, to fulfill.

## **The Rosh Hashanah Reading**

We're just days away from Rosh Hashanah, and it's interesting to note that the Torah reading on the first day starts with the story of Yitzchak's birth. Right in the first few verses, we hear about the first Jewish baby to be circumcised at eight days old: "And Avraham circumcised his son Yitzchak when he was eight days old, as G-d had commanded him" (Vayeira 21:4).

Why does the Torah begin Rosh Hashanah with Yitzchak's bris? The word Bris means Covenant, and every Rosh Hashanah, G-d renews a covenant with the Jewish people. But this isn't a physical bris—it's more like a covenant of commitment, similar to a marriage. You can actually see this theme in the opening of Parshat Nitzavim, which we always read right before Rosh Hashanah.

The parsha begins with: "You are all standing today before Hashem, your leaders, tribes... every person in Israel... from the woodcutter to the water carrier, to enter into the covenant of G-d" (Devarim 29:9-11). The word "today" is referring to Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment. On Rosh Hashanah, we enter into this covenant with G-d, and the beauty of the day is that we all stand together, united as one. It's through this unity that we merit a favorable judgment and are blessed with a good and sweet year. (Sefer Maamarim Melukat vol. 1 pg. 499)

The Rebbe makes an interesting point here. The Torah could've just said, "You are all standing here today," and that would've been enough to show that we're united. But instead, it highlights the

different roles among the Jewish people: “Your leaders, your tribes, your elders... your convert... from the woodcutter to the water carrier.” Why emphasize these differences? Wouldn’t it be better to focus on what brings us together—that we’re all descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov?

## The Explanation

The Rebbe offers an interesting explanation. The Sages teach that when we pray, we should have “our eyes below and our heart above” (Yevamot 105b). But the Rebbe asks, isn’t the focus of prayer supposed to be on the “above”—connecting with G-d? After all, the purpose of prayer is to rise above the everyday and elevate ourselves spiritually, like Yaakov’s ladder, which “was set on the ground but reached the heavens.” So why do the Sages also emphasize keeping our eyes “below” during prayer?

The Rebbe explained this by prefacing a few stories of the Alter Rebbe.

One story is about him and his son, the Mittlerer Rebbe. The Alter Rebbe lived on the top floor of his house, while his son, the Mittlerer Rebbe, who later took over as Rebbe, lived on the floor below. One time, the Mittlerer Rebbe’s baby fell from its crib and started crying. The Mittlerer Rebbe was so immersed in his Torah learning that he didn’t even hear the baby. But the Alter Rebbe, upstairs, heard it. He came down, picked up the baby, calmed him, and put him back in the crib. Later, he told his son, “No matter how deeply you’re studying Torah, you must always be able to hear the cry of a child.”

That’s an amazing story, but this still doesn’t make the point. The next famous Alter Rebbe story will bring the point home.

One Yom Kippur, right in the middle of the davening, the Alter Rebbe suddenly removed his tallis and kittel and just... disappeared. At first, the chassidim thought, “Okay, he probably just stepped out for a few minutes, he’ll be back soon.” But as time went on and he didn’t return, they got worried and went searching for him.

They finally found him at the edge of town, in a house where a woman had just given birth. Everyone in the house had gone to shul, leaving her and the newborn alone. While he was still in shul, the Alter Rebbe somehow “sensed” that this woman and her baby were cold. So, he left, chopped wood, and made soup for her—all of this on Yom Kippur! Since it was a matter of *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life), not only was it allowed, but it was required for him to step in and help.

The Rebbe pointed out that the Yom Kippur story is even more remarkable than the baby story, because in the case of the baby, someone actually heard the cry. But with the woman, no one physically heard her cry or even knew she needed help. The Alter Rebbe felt it spiritually.

But that raises a question: Why did G-d arrange for the Alter Rebbe, in his elevated Yom Kippur state, to be the one to sense it? Of course, it's a mitzvah to save a life, and the Alter Rebbe was right to go help. But couldn't someone else have been the one to step in at that crucial moment? Couldn't the synagogue attendant or someone else have found out about it?

The Rebbe explains that it was precisely because the Alter Rebbe was in such a high, spiritual state that G-d wanted him to feel the needs of someone so far below him. It teaches us that even when we're in our most elevated spiritual state—like the Alter Rebbe in the middle of Yom Kippur davening—we can't forget about those who are down below and in need of help. That's why the Gemara says that the one who prays, even while soaring spiritually and exploring the higher realms, must “keep his eyes below”—to never lose sight of those who need assistance.

This ties back to our parsha. The Torah doesn't stop at “You are all standing today.” It goes on to detail the different levels within the Jewish people, from leaders to water carriers. It's a reminder that we can't just assume everyone is on the same level and think, “Well, if I can manage, they can too.” No, we have to remember that some people need our help, whether physical or spiritual. And only when we keep our eyes below, looking out for those in need, will G-d make a covenant with us on Rosh Hashanah and bless us with a good and sweet year.