



The Opening Act

Why do we start our Jewish lives with a circumcision?

The Strange Question

Rabbi Aharon Moss teaches Kabbalah and Judaism in Sydney, Australia, and answers questions that are posed to Chabad.org. Once, he received a rather unconventional question.

"Although I was raised in a traditional home, was brissed and barmitzvad, I have never had any faith or religious belief. I am now aged 34, and would describe myself as an atheist. I have no wish to be buried in a Jewish cemetery (and my Will will also make this clear) and have married a non-Jew in a civil ceremony.

"My question is, can I consider myself officially non-Jewish, by my effective opting-out, or do I need some sort of form or dispensation to be officially no longer Jewish?"

"Many thanks for your help with what is perhaps an unusual question."

Rabbi Moss responded that he would love to help, but there was nothing he could do.

He explained: "According to your question, you have done everything possible to negate your Jewishness: in practice you do not keep Jewish tradition; in belief you are an atheist; and even in death you are determined not to be buried in a Jewish cemetery."

"One would think," says Rabbi Moss, "that all this would be enough to confirm your un-Jewishness. But no! For some reason, you are still unsatisfied: you still feel Jewish! So much so, you feel you need official dispensation! And so, being an atheist, who do you turn to to solve this problem? A doctor? A psychiatrist? The civil celebrant that married you? No... You turn to a rabbi!"

Rabbi Moss brings an example: "I'm reminded of the child who ran

away from home, but ended up just going around and around the block because his parents told him never to cross the road by himself.”

He ends off with a “sorry” conclusion: “I’m sorry, Edward. There is nothing more you can do. You are as Jewish as Moses, and the Chief Rabbi of Wales! In fact, it seems that being Jewish is the most dominant factor of your personality. It is even influencing the place you want to be buried! (Why would an atheist care about where they are buried?)

“Edward,” Rabbi Moss concludes, “Jewishness is not a belief, a feeling, a conviction or a lifestyle. It is a state of being. We can either celebrate it or fight against it. But it will always be there. So why not celebrate it?”

The Converts

This week, we read the parsha of *Lech Lecha*, which begins with a story of conversion. When Abraham left Haran, it says, he took his family with him—“and the souls that they made in Haran.” The Midrash asks, “What does ‘made’ mean? Even if all the people of the world joined forces, they wouldn’t be able to create even a mosquito!”

The explanation is that Abraham “made” converts. Obviously, these were not converts in the traditional sense, because Judaism didn’t really exist yet, but it means that he brought them “under the wings of the Shekhinah.”

The conclusion of the parsha, on the other hand, is the commandment of circumcision, the first commandment given to Abraham.

Well, if we want to sum up this year since October 7th, it’s been a year of conversions and circumcisions.

Toward the end of 2023, a story emerged about a soldier in one of Israel’s elite units who fought in the kibbutzim near the Gaza border. His unit was deployed that Shabbat to Nahal Oz, where they battled for over two days, eventually freeing the kibbutz from terrorists. After that, he and his unit were reassigned to the northern border.

In the Israeli army, there’s a “military rabbinate” that provides conversion services for non-Jewish soldiers who want to become Jewish, following the requirements of Jewish law. This soldier had already been in the process of converting before the war. But after

fighting on October 7, he approached the military rabbinical court, asking to expedite his conversion.

The rabbis called him in for a hearing with three judges. They asked him questions about Judaism, Torah, and mitzvot to see if he was ready. But then he shared why it was so urgent for him to complete his conversion. With a voice filled with emotion, he said, "I wanted to finish my conversion because I know I might die in battle. If, G-d forbid, that happens, I want to die as a Jew." Deeply moved, the rabbis expedited his conversion, completing it that very day.

There have been similar stories about circumcisions. Many Jews who weren't circumcised for various reasons always thought they'd eventually do it, but it kept getting delayed. After October 7, though, something in their Jewish identity sparked, and they wanted to feel that connection to the Jewish people.

One organization, "Brit Yosef Yitzchak," helps with circumcisions for Jewish babies and adults worldwide, offering services free of charge and with enthusiasm. If someone needs a mohel, this organization sends one wherever they are. Over the past 35 years, they've done 75,000 circumcisions to date, using experienced mohels, surgeons, and specialists worldwide. One of these mohels, who travels internationally, recently shared that since the conflict in Israel began, he's received calls from people who had wanted a circumcision for years but hadn't gone through with it. Now, they're not only ready—they're urging him to come as soon as possible.

The Four Keys

Circumcision is not only the first commandment given to Abraham, but it is also the first mitzvah that every Jew fulfills at the age of eight days. Why does a Jew start his life specifically with this commandment?

The Rebbe explains that in four special ways, this mitzvah is a reflection of all the mitzvos, and that's why we begin with this one.

1. "Circumcision is the only mitzvah whose mark is visible on the body." It cannot be erased. In the Greek-Roman world, the foreskin was considered a symbol of beauty and masculinity. The Greeks held naked athletic competitions, and as a result, there were Jews who were embarrassed to participate in these

contests, and tried many methods to remove the Jewish mark.

Well, the Rebbe says, just as circumcision leaves a visible mark on the body, every mitzvah a Jew performs leaves a mark on the soul—even if it's not so visible to the outside world. When a Jew strives to observe the mitzvos, it will ultimately be reflected on his face. It leaves a mark on him; he becomes a little more refined.

2. Circumcision also has physical benefits for the body (contrary to what some organizations that oppose circumcision might claim). Doctors agree that circumcision contributes to a man's health. In countries where circumcision is practiced, people suffer far less from certain diseases compared to countries where circumcision is not common. Years ago, the government in Kenya launched a nationwide campaign to stop the spread of Aids, and as part of this initiative, they set up stations across the country where people could receive a circumcision. The campaign was called "Take the Cut."

The Rebbe explains that just as circumcision brings physical benefits to the body, it brings benefits to the soul. In fact, the physical benefits are insignificant compared to the spiritual benefits. And again, this is true for every commandment that a Jew fulfills—it will bring physical benefits, but the spiritual rewards are immeasurably greater.

3. Circumcision involves pain—the baby cries—but an adult who undergoes the procedure won't cry, because he understands the spiritual benefit of the act. The same is true for all commandments: performing a mitzvah can sometimes be challenging or even painful, but the reward is always far greater than the difficulty. The mitzvah often comes at the wrong time—holidays may be too early or too late—but we must remember that the benefit we receive from the mitzvah, both physically and spiritually, is far greater.
4. Circumcision is a mitzvah that Jews perform with joy. They

celebrate the circumcision with a ceremony and gifts. Although the baby is crying and the mother is a bit worried, the mitzvah is still performed joyfully, and everyone wishes the family mazal tov, and another unique aspect of the mitzvah of circumcision is that Jews have risked their lives to fulfill this commandment. During the darkest days in Russia, Jews performed circumcisions underground.

The circumcision reminds us that every mitzvah must be performed with joy, and when necessary, with self-sacrifice. Sometimes it's inconvenient or costly, and we may have to give up sports or leisure activities, but we should always be happy to connect to G-d.

So, in summation—Performing the Bris is the beginning of a long Jewish life, and a deep connection with G-d. That's why it's first.