

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 25

Vayera, Sicha 3

The Context:

Expounding on Yitzchak's circumcision in parshas Vayera (Bereishis, 21:4), the Midrash comments, "Yishmael and Yitzchak argued with one another. This one said, "I am more precious than you because I was circumcised at thirteen years old," and this one said, "I am more precious than you because I was circumcised at eight days old." (Bereishis Rabbah, 55:4)

Further illustrating the value of the eight day circumcision is another teaching from the Midrash. Enumerating the evolution of mitzvos given prior to Sinai, the Midrash lists Adam's seven mitzvos, Noah's additional prohibition against eating flesh from a live animal, Avraham's command to circumcise, and Yitzchak's inauguration of circumcision at eight days old. (Shir Hashirim Rabbah, 1:2 [5])

The Midrash implies that there is a qualitative difference between Avraham's

adult circumcision and Yitzchak's on the eight day.

The Question:

Yishmael's argument is seemingly persuasive — he consciously chose to fulfill G-d's command to be circumcised, while Yitzchak was an infant incapable of choice. How can Yitzchak claim that his circumcision at eight days is more precious than Yishmael's? How does his lack of participation and acquiescence actually make the circumcision more valuable?

The Explanation:

Circumcision is a physical representation of the everlasting bond between G-d and the Jewish people, as G-d told Avraham, "My covenant shall be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant." (Bereishis 17:13). The function of a covenant between two individuals is to protect their loyalty to one another from the natural erosion of time, friction, and change. The covenant ensures that, even if there are challenges, the parties remain committed to one another.

Yet no matter how sincere the individuals are, they remain limited and imperfect human beings who can never truly guarantee a timeless, changeless relationship to one another. When G-d initiates a covenant, however, it is truly immutable, since G-d is not subject to change.

This is why Avraham could not autonomously choose to circumcise himself prior to G-d's command, even though the Sages tell us that he observed the Torah before it was given. The covenant effected through the act of circumcision can only be initiated by G-d. If Avraham would attempt to initiate this covenant, it would be vulnerable to humankind's innate limitations.

Based on the above, we can appreciate that there is a fundamental difference between a circumcision chosen by a mature, independent adult, and one performed on

an infant. The more robust the sense of self, the less apparent is the Divine initiative of the covenant. Even though Avraham and Yishmael were responding to G-d's command, and not proactively fashioning a covenant of their own choosing, still, their developed sense of self and prior spiritual accomplishments distracts from the pure Divine-initiated covenant. They still had to make a conscious choice to opt into the bond.

But Yitzchak's circumcision at eight days is the purest vessel for the Divinely designed covenant. There is no sense of independent thought or spiritual appreciation. The child is a blank canvas on which G-d can expressly imprint His everlasting bond with the body of the Jew. This is why Yitzchak's eighth-day circumcision is more precious than Yishmael's — precisely because it expresses the infinite covenant with G-d that only G-d Himself can introduce to the world.
