



# Likkutei Sichos

Volume 17 | Tazria | Sichah 1

## Circumcision at Night

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## 1.

### THE SOURCE FOR DAYTIME CIRCUMCISIONS

On the verse,<sup>1</sup> “And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised,” our Rabbis expound in *Toras Kohanim*<sup>2</sup> (and in the *Gemara*),<sup>3</sup> “during the day, but not at night.” Based on this teaching, the ruling prohibiting circumcision at night was introduced after *Matan Torah*.<sup>4</sup> Prior to *Matan Torah*, however, circumcision was also permissible at night.

The same conclusion can be drawn even according to the second source for the aforementioned ruling, (found in tractate *Shabbos*),<sup>5</sup> from the verse in *parshas Lech Lecha*,<sup>6</sup> “at the age of eight days....” (Notably, according to *Tosfos*,<sup>7</sup> this ruling is inferred primarily from *this* latter verse.) Based on this source, the requirement to circumcise during the day only applies to a circumcision performed at its ideal, designated time.<sup>8</sup> However, the law that even if a circumcision is not performed at its designated time, the circumcision must still be performed during the day is derived<sup>9</sup> from the (“*vav* {and}” in the) verse, “*and* on the eighth day...” in our *parshah* (as *Tosfos*<sup>10</sup> explains). Therefore, we conclude that this ruling was introduced only after *Matan Torah*.

## 2.

### BUT WHY AT NIGHT?

In order to clarify this point, we must preface with a *Midrash*.<sup>11</sup> While the Jews were in Egypt:

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<sup>1</sup> *Vayikra* 12:3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Megillah* 20a.

<sup>4</sup> {Since *parshas Tazria* is related after *Matan Torah*, which is in *parshas Yisro*.}

<sup>5</sup> 132a.

<sup>6</sup> *Bereishis* 17:12.

<sup>7</sup> *Shabbos*, *ibid.*, s.v. “*hahee*”; *Megillah*, *ibid.*, s.v. “*dichsiv*.”

<sup>8</sup> {I.e., on the eighth day.}

<sup>9</sup> *Toras Kohanim*, *ibid.*; *Yevamos* 72b.

<sup>10</sup> *Yevamos*, *ibid.*, s.v. “*mar*.”

<sup>11</sup> *Shemos Rabbah*, ch. 19, par. 5; *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, ch. 11, par. 12(3), ch. 3, par. 6(4). As we will discuss.

Many of them did not agree to be circumcised. Hashem instructed them to offer the *korban Pesach*,<sup>12</sup> and when Moshe offered the *korban Pesach*, Hashem decreed that the four winds {carry the scent of *Gan Eden*}... the winds went and concentrated themselves on that *korban Pesach*.... The Jewish people gathered in Moshe's presence and requested, "Moshe, **feed us** from your *korban Pesach*...." He answered, "If you are uncircumcised, you may not eat...." Immediately, they all went to circumcise themselves....

This *Midrash* indicates that the Jewish people had circumcised themselves on the **night** of Pesach.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the *Midrash* (primarily, the version in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*) indicates that Moshe did not even convey the ruling that "no uncircumcised male may eat of it"<sup>14</sup> until (that night, when) the Jewish people came to Moshe and asked him to "**feed us** from your *korban Pesach*."

This is difficult to understand: True, circumcisions at night were permitted because this incident took place before *Matan Torah*. But we need to clarify (at least according to the deeper dimension of Torah): Since the Jewish people ("many of them") circumcised themselves (not by their own initiative but rather) because "**Hashem decreed** that the four winds....," and the aroma stimulated in them a craving to eat from Moshe's *korban Pesach*, Hashem could have done this (or something similar) before nightfall. At that time, Moshe could have taught the Jewish people that "no uncircumcised male may eat of it," and they could have been circumcised during the day!

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<sup>12</sup> {The paschal lamb, which was sacrificed on the eve of the first night of Pesach, roasted whole, and then eaten.}

<sup>13</sup> See also Rashi's commentary on *Shemos* 12:6; *Ba'al HaTurim* on *Shemos* 12:13. {They circumcised themselves **after** asking Moshe to let them eat from his *korban Pesach*, which was eaten after nightfall.}

<sup>14</sup> *Shemos* 12:48.

### 3.

#### IT CANNOT HAVE HAPPENED BEFORE NIGHTFALL

*Yefei To'ar*<sup>15</sup> suggests: Perhaps this took place **before** nightfall. (He brings two proofs:) Yom Tov begins at nightfall, and a circumcision that is not performed on the eighth day does not override Yom Tov.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, “we do not perform circumcisions at night.”<sup>17</sup>

But this explanation is untenable. This narrative, as recorded in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* (on the verse,<sup>18</sup> “While the king was at his table...”), clearly indicates that the circumcision took place at night. The *Midrash* there states that these events happened “while the king was at his table,” i.e., “while Moshe and the Jewish people feasted and were consuming their *korban Pesach*, while in Egypt,” and the *korban Pesach* had to be **eaten**, “on this night,”<sup>19</sup> i.e., on the **night** of the 15th of *Nissan* (and not **before** nightfall<sup>20</sup>).

Additionally, these two proofs — a) that a circumcision that is not performed in its ideal, designated time does not override Yom Tov, and b) that we do not perform circumcisions at night — are not compelling for two reasons:

- a) As mentioned, the ruling prohibiting circumcisions at night (as it applied to circumcisions not performed on the eighth day) was only introduced after *Matan Torah*.
- b) Similarly, we find no mention of *melachah*<sup>21</sup> being prohibited on the Yom Tov days of Pesach in Egypt. For although the verse in *parshas Bo* says,<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In his commentary on *Shemos Rabbah*, loc. cit. {*Yefei Toar*, commentary on *Midrash*, authored by Shmuel ben Yitzchak Jaffe, Ashkenazi (circa 16th century). He served as Rabbinic authority for the Jewish community in Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey.}

<sup>16</sup> *Shabbos* 132b. {Many acts involved in circumcision are forbidden on Shabbos or Yom Tov. However, many of these prohibitions are overridden when performing a circumcision on the eighth day.}

<sup>17</sup> *Megilah* 20a.

<sup>18</sup> *Shir Hashirim* 1:12.

<sup>19</sup> *Shemos* 12:8.

<sup>20</sup> *Zevachim* 56b, 57b; *Pesachim* 41b. See also *Tosefta*, “*Pesachim*,” end of ch. 2 (mentioned by *Tosfos*, s.v. “*ad shetechshach*,” *Pesachim* 92b).

<sup>21</sup> {*Melachah* denotes the creative activities prohibited on Shabbos and Yom Tov.}

<sup>22</sup> *Shemos* 12:16.

“On the first day shall be a holy convocation, and on the seventh day shall be a holy convocation for you; no *melachah* may be done on them,” this verse cannot refer to the Pesach celebrated in Egypt. For the Pesach in Egypt only lasted one day,<sup>23</sup> and the verse says, “and on the **seventh** day shall be a holy convocation.”

[We cannot posit that this verse teaches two **separate**, independent laws:

a) “On the first day shall be a holy convocation,” which also applied to Pesach celebrated in Egypt, and

b) “On the seventh day shall be a holy convocation,” which only applies to Pesach celebrated in future generations.

This is untenable because:

a) The Torah says, “No *melachah* may be done on **them**.” Meaning, the prohibition against performing *melachah* on the first and seventh days of Pesach are contained in a **single** command.

b) The *Mechilta*, commenting on the verse, “No *melachah* may be done on them,” says:

This verse prohibits *melachah* only on the final Yom Tov {of Pesach, i.e., the seventh day}. What is the source prohibiting *melachah* on the first Yom Tov {of Pesach, i.e., the first day}? “On the first day shall be a holy convocation.”

The *Mechilta* indicates that the Torah **primarily** forbids *melachah* “on the seventh day,” but from this prohibition, we infer that *melachah* is prohibited “on the first day.” Since the **primary** prohibition (“on the seventh day”) did not apply in Egypt, the **additional** prohibition (“on the first day”) clearly did not apply in Egypt.

c) In Egypt, the Pesach celebrated had no “first day”; it only consisted of “one day.”]

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<sup>23</sup> *Pesachim* 96b. See *Likkutei Torah*, “Tzav,” p. 11d; *Siddur Im Dach*, s.v. “*Vehigadeta*,” p. 296c; *Or HaTorah*, “*Vaera*,” p. 2569; *Or HaTorah*, s.v. “*Vehigadeta*,” “*Vayikra* vol. 3,” p. 731 ff.

## 4.

### THE SWORD

Even according to the authority (*Ran*)<sup>24</sup> who maintains that in Egypt, the Jewish people in Egypt were prohibited from performing *melachah* on Pesach, we can resolve the difficulty with the *Midrash* (how could a circumcision that was not performed on the eighth day have overridden Yom Tov?) by prefacing with an examination of the *Midrash's* nuanced wording (in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*):<sup>25</sup>

*All of them gripping swords, skilled in battle, each with his sword on his thigh*<sup>26</sup> — When Moshe told the Jewish people... immediately, each one took his sword upon his thigh and circumcised himself.

We might ask:

a) Why is the fact that they circumcised themselves with **swords** significant? Isn't the main point is that they circumcised themselves "**immediately**"?

b) Why does the *Midrash* emphasize, "**his** sword"? What difference would it make if the sword was his or if it belonged to someone else?

In light of the nuanced wording of the *Midrash*, we can resolve the aforementioned question: When is circumcision considered to be a prohibited form of *melachah* on Yom Tov? When it is performed in its usual manner, with a scalpel.<sup>27</sup> However, circumcision with a sword would be considered a *melachah* performed in an unusual manner, and such *melachah* is permitted biblically.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Pesachim* 116a.

<sup>25</sup> *Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, ch. 3, par. 6 (4); similarly, ch. 1, par. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Shir Hashirim* 3:8.

<sup>27</sup> {In the Hebrew original, "izmel."} The *Talmud*, e.g., *Shabbos* 130a, uses this word. *Bartenura* [*Keilim* 13:4] defines it as, "a small blade used for circumcising infants." Notably, Rambam writes [*Mishneh Torah*, "*Hilchos Milah*," sec. 2, par. 1, quoted in *Tur*, "*Yoreh Deah*," sec. 264]: "All Jews customarily use a knife."

<sup>28</sup> For "making a person fit" {"tikunei gavra"} (see *Shabbos* 106a, Rashi's commentary, s.v. "mah li") is **intrinsically** only prohibited rabbinically [even if the exemption for *melachah* performed in an unusual manner

Thus, the *Midrash* (and verse quoted there) emphasize that they circumcised themselves with swords.

If the *Midrash* had written simply, “sword,” we could still interpret this as a type of sword used for circumcisions. As Scripture says,<sup>29</sup> “Make sharp swords for yourself and circumcise the children of Israel again, a second time.” To forestall this interpretation, the Torah emphasizes, “**his** sword,” i.e., the sword of those “skilled in **battle**,” which certainly is not a sword used for circumcisions.

On this basis — that on Pesach in Egypt the Jewish people circumcised themselves at night — our original difficulty remains: Why didn’t Hashem orchestrate matters so that the Jewish people would have been able to circumcise themselves during the day, before nightfall?

## 5.

### NIGHT SHINES LIKE DAY

This issue will be clarified by prefacing with another resolution (to the difficulty as to how the Jewish people were permitted to circumcise themselves at night) offered by the later Rabbinic authorities.<sup>30</sup> (As the *Zohar* writes:)<sup>31</sup> On the night of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, the night shone “like day.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, that night had the *halachic* status of “day.”

A difficulty was raised:<sup>33</sup> If the night of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* had the *halachic* status of day, how could the Jewish people have fulfilled the *mitzvos*

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would not apply]. See *Minchas Chinuch*, “*Mosach HaShabbos*” (*mleches makeh ba’patish*). See the discussion in *Chemdas Yisrael*, found in *Kuntres Ner Mitzvah*, 59d ff., whose opinion opposes that of *Minchas Chinuch*.

<sup>29</sup> *Yehoshua* 5:2. The *Targum* [and Rashi] write, “*izmelin*.”

<sup>30</sup> *Sheeilos Uteshuvos Yad Eliyahu*, sec. 51 (Amsterdam ed. 5472/1702); *Simchas Haregel* (by *Chidah*) “*Masseh B’rabbi Elazar...*”; “*Amar Rabbi Elazar ben Azariya...*”

<sup>31</sup> *Zohar*, vol. 2, p. 38a.

<sup>32</sup> *Tehillim* 139:12.

<sup>33</sup> *Responsa of Toras Chesed*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 25, par. 6.

that must be performed at **night** (eating the *korban Pesach*,<sup>34</sup> *matzah*,<sup>35</sup> *maror* etc.)?<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, we must conclude that the night had the *halachic* status of day only regarding the *mitzvah* of circumcision, but not regarding the other *mitzvos* mentioned above. This distinction is reasonable, for the Jews were commanded explicitly, “They shall eat the meat on this night... your waist belted....”<sup>37</sup>

## 6.

### CANCELLING SEDER HISHTALSHELUS

According to the deeper teachings of Torah, this matter can be explained as follows: What is unique about the *mitzvah* of circumcision that the night shone “like the day” only regarding this *mitzvah*? The Exodus unfolded in a manner of *Pesach*, meaning, “skipping” — an event that “skipped” beyond the bounds and limitations of nature. For according to nature, it was impossible for the Jewish people to leave Egypt. (Physically, “no slave could escape Egypt,”<sup>38</sup> and metaphysically, the Jewish people were entrenched in the forty-nine gates of impurity.)<sup>39</sup>

How can the bounds of nature be nullified in this world? This is accomplished by nullifying the bounds and limitations (“*Mitzrayim*” {cognate to the word “*meitzarim*,”} meaning “boundaries”)<sup>40</sup> of the **entire**<sup>41</sup>  *seder*

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<sup>34</sup> *Zevachim* 56b, 57b; *Pesachim* 41b. See also *Tosefta*, “*Pesachim*,” end of ch. 2 (mentioned in *Tosfos*, s.v. “*ad shetechshach*,” *Pesachim* 92b.)

<sup>35</sup> *Shemos* 12:8, 18. See also *Tosefta*, “*Pesachim*,” end of ch. 2 (mentioned in *Tosfos*, s.v. “*ad shetechshach*,” *Pesachim* 92b.)

<sup>36</sup> *Simchas Haregel*, *ibid.*, proposes that *the night shone like the day* means that “night and day became equal, and thus this period of time served as both.”

<sup>37</sup> {*Shemos* 12:8, 11.}

<sup>38</sup> *Mechilta Shemos* 18:11; Rashi’s commentary on *Shemos* 18:9.

<sup>39</sup> *Zohar Chadash*, beginning of *parshas Yisro*.

<sup>40</sup> *Torah Or*, p. 71c.

<sup>41</sup> See *Torah Or*, *ibid.*, where the author writes that the entire  *seder hishtalshelus* is called *mitzrayim*.



*hishtalshelus*.<sup>42</sup> This occurs when a *light* shines<sup>43</sup> that is totally beyond any boundary or limitation of *seder hishtalshelus*<sup>44</sup> in its entirety.

Since everything must come about through the channel of Torah,<sup>45</sup> everything must have an antecedent in Torah. Thus, we must also find an antecedent for this matter (of drawing *light* from beyond *seder hishtalshelus* in order to nullify the limitations of *seder hishtalshelus*) in Torah. Torah itself receives a Heavenly outflow, the source of which is beyond Torah itself, so to speak; that is, it is beyond the limitations of Torah.

Therefore, Hashem arranged matters so that Moshe would not convey the command that “...no uncircumcised man may eat from it {the *korban Pesach*}” before nightfall. Instead, he had to convey this command specifically at night. It was done in this way so that the Jewish people would circumcise themselves specifically at night. (In contrast, after *Matan Torah*, this commandment was drawn into the limitations of Torah {to be performed during the daytime only}.) The reason: The revelation of G-dly *light* that illuminated that night was from beyond the entire *seder hishtalshelus*, to the extent that it was from beyond the limitations of Torah, so to speak. Thus, this revelation nullified the limitations of *seder hishtalshelus*; the Heavenly outflow of Divine *light* was in a manner of *skipping*. G-dliness was drawn into Egypt, a land blanketed with idol-worship<sup>46</sup> (an influence that would have been impossible within the parameters of *seder hishtalshelus*). In this way, the limitations of nature were also neutralized in this world. There was a “*Pesach*,” a “skipping over,” and the Exodus took place in contravention of the norms of nature.

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<sup>42</sup> {*Seder Hishtalshelus* refers to the chain-like descent of spiritual worlds until this world. Each spiritual world denotes a complete realm of existence, resulting from its general proximity to or distance from Divine revelation. The spectrum of *seder hishtalshelus* represents reality as it exists outside of Hashem’s infinity.}

<sup>43</sup> {I.e., Divine revelation.}

<sup>44</sup> See *Likkutei Torah*, “*Tzav*,” end of p. 13d.

<sup>45</sup> *Bereishis Rabbah*, beg.

<sup>46</sup> See *Mechilta*, “*Bo*,” sec. 12, par. 1; *Tanchuma*, “*Bo*,” par. 5; *Shemos Rabbah*, ch. 12, par. 5; Rashi’s commentary on *Shemos* 9:29.

## THE ETERNAL, INFINITE, BOND

Just as in Torah, “skipping over” was necessary in order to enable *yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Jewish people had to perform their *avodah* in a manner of “skipping over,” beyond their own *seder hishtalshelus* {i.e., beyond conventional, measured *avodah*}.

For this reason, the blood of the *korban Pesach* and the blood of the circumcision were needed to prepare for the Exodus, for these two *mitzvos* call for *avodah* that is beyond limitation.<sup>47</sup> “Pesach” is etymologically related to “skipping over” {in Hebrew}, and circumcision is an “**eternal** covenant”<sup>48</sup> with Hashem — an unlimited, eternal bond.

On this basis, we understand why *korban Pesach* and circumcision are unique when compared with all other positive commandments — regarding the punishment of *kares*.<sup>49</sup> When speaking of matters that are beyond *hishtalshelus* and beyond gradations, no possibility of intervening levels exists. Only one of two options are possible: Either a person has become connected to Hashem with an eternal bond, beyond the fluctuations of time, that is unlimited; or the opposite is true, he “will be cut off,”<sup>50</sup> for he has no connection to G-dliness, G-d forfend.

[This is similar to the general concept of the Exodus, as mentioned, necessitating the elimination of all limitations including the limitations of Torah, so to speak. For if not, we would have remained stuck in Egypt, a land **full** of idolatry.]

Therefore, the revelation of a “night that shone like day” was needed at the time of the Exodus, a phenomenon that had a deep-rooted connection to the

<sup>47</sup> See also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 3, p. 867ff.

<sup>48</sup> *Bereishis* 17:13.

<sup>49</sup>{Excision: Divinely imposed premature death.} *Kerisus* 1:1. See *Or Hatorah Yisro* (vol. 7 pp. 2697, 2698) which explains the words, “*b’hashmatos zohar chadash... mai taama pesach umilah... v’is b’hu kares*”; *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 3, p. 834, fn. 23.

<sup>50</sup> {*Bereishis* 17:14.}

*mitzvah* of circumcision. For the “night that shone like day” — the revelation Divine *light* — was bound up with the “night that shone like day” in the *avodah* of Jewish people — the blood of circumcision.

## 8.

### BEFORE *MATAN TORAH* AND AFTER

Based on all the above, we are also able to appreciate the distinction between the *mitzvah* of circumcision before and after *Matan Torah*.

True “skipping over” was a feature specifically of the *mitzvah* of circumcision before *Matan Torah*. Circumcision at that time involved more than just “skipping” from one extreme to another — the Jewish people departed from the domain of *kelipah*<sup>51</sup> and entered into the domain of holiness. Furthermore, they escaped the forty-nine gates of impurity to receive the revelation of “Hashem Himself in His honor and glory.”<sup>52</sup> This transition was totally revolutionary. At this level, absolutely no gradations existed, and so there was no distinction between night and day.<sup>53</sup>

In contrast, after *Matan Torah*, the Jewish people operated within the framework and system of holiness;<sup>54</sup> even the “eternal covenant” established through circumcision operated within this system of holiness. Consequently, circumcision became an *avodah* that had boundaries and limitations in which there was a distinction between day and night.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> {*Kelipah* translates literally as “a shell” or “a peel.” The term refers to anything that conceals, and thus opposes G-dliness, just as a shell or a peel conceals the fruit within. *Kelipah* is often used to refer to evil or impurity.}

<sup>52</sup> **Malchus** of *Ein Sof* and **Atzmus** of *Ein Sof* before the *tzimtzum* {a lofty level of revelation}. (*Sefer HaMaamarim* 5671, p. 75.)

<sup>53</sup> {So circumcision was able to be performed at night.}

<sup>54</sup> See *Likkutei Torah*, beg. of “*Re’eh*”; see at length *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 11, p. 5ff.

<sup>55</sup> {As a result, circumcision was limited to the daytime.}

## 9.

### MESIRAS NEFESH

The lesson, based on this discussion, in our practical *avodah*:

In every generation and every single day, the *avodah* of *yetzias Mitzrayim* {leaving behind constraints} is relevant and must be engaged in.<sup>56</sup> For every level is a “*mitzrayim*” (meaning, a limitation and a constraint) compared with a higher one.<sup>57</sup> When a person needs to leave *Mitzrayim*, he must know that no limitations or constraints impede him, even limitations of Torah, so to speak.

Similar to the concept explained in *Tanya*:<sup>58</sup> When it comes to a Jew transgressing Hashem’s will, Heaven forbid (in a state of *Egyptian exile*), there is no difference between the most minor and the most severe transgression.<sup>59</sup> From the perspective of Hashem’s **will**, which is beyond reason and understanding (even beyond Hashem’s reason and understanding), **all mitzvos** are equal. This realization arouses even the most irreverent Jew to give up his life even for a minor, legal inference of the Rabbis,<sup>60</sup> without making any calculations.

How much more so, then, do the limitations of night and day become irrelevant. {Metaphorically speaking:} No matter whether a Jew is in a state of “light,” or, G-d forbid, “darkness”; no matter whether he feels tired and experiences all types of desires and cravings, etc.; still, he draws his sword courageously (beyond reason and rationale) and circumcises himself. Immediately, he binds himself to Hashem by fulfilling His will, creating a bond,<sup>61</sup> a connection, and an eternal covenant with Hashem.

-Based on a talk delivered on *Acharon Shel Pesach*, 5725 (1965)

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<sup>56</sup> *Tanya* ch. 47.

<sup>57</sup> See also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 2, p. 348ff.

<sup>58</sup> Ch. 24, 25.

<sup>59</sup> As our Sages teach in *Tanchuma*, “*Ekev*,” par. 2; *Devarim Rabbah*, ch. 6, par. 2; *Yalkut Shimoni*, “*Yisro*,” *remez* 298.

<sup>60</sup> {In the Hebrew original, “*didkuk kal shel divei Sofrim*.”}

<sup>61</sup> {“*Bivchinas yesod*,” in the Hebrew original; *yesod* is the *sefirah* that connotes connection, and is linked with the same organ that is circumcised.}