

CHIZUK & IDUD

*Divrei Torah from the weekly sedra
with a focus on living in Eretz Yisrael
Chizuk for Olim & Idud for not-yet-Olim*

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At the beginning of this week's parsha we read: "On the 8th day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." The Rabbis, sensitive as they were to any repetitions in the Biblical text, immediately sought a reason for this additional account: Have we not already learned of the Brit Mila in Parshat Lech L'cha re Avraham? The Talmud (Shabbat 132a) teaches us that the verse is intended to teach us that when the eighth day falls on Shabbat the Brit is **DOCHEH SHABBAT**, suspending the laws of this holy day.

Seeing as this Halacha is one of the most well-known facts of Jewish life, the average reader may have never noticed to what extent the authority of the Oral Torah shapes our religious lives in this regard. This fact was made apparent to me many years ago when as the Rabbi of the Absorption centers I assisted the recently arrived Ethiopian Olim. The first time the need arose I began the preparations needed in order to arrange for a Shabbat Brit when the bewildered parents began protesting. They were oblivious of the

teachings of Torah SheB'al Peh, and had never before heard of Britot being performed on Shabbat. "You shall observe the Shabbat for it is holy to you, whoever profanes it is certainly to die", they quoted from Parshat Ki Tisa (Sh'mot 31:14), believing that under no circumstance is the Shabbat to be suspended.

Readers of this column may recall the competing approaches of the Chief Rabbis of the day, Rav Avraham Shapira zt"l and Rav Mordechai Eliyahu zt"l, when presented with this type of dilemma surrounding the Ethiopian's irregular customs. The Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi was of the opinion that planning the Brit for Sunday instead of on the eighth day (Shabbat) was no less than a willful plan to circumvent the requirements of Torah Shebe'al Peh, and therefore as a matter of public policy I could not be party to this in any way. The Sefardi Chief Rabbi presented a markedly different, more tolerant, outlook. He felt that it would take some time for the Ethiopian Olim to become familiar with the accepted Halacha as practiced by all other communities, directing me to help them slowly along their path and not turn my back on them.

Incidentally, the Ethiopian custom also differed in terms of where the Brit was to take place. I remember being puzzled by the fact that so few chose

to attend the Brit ceremony which we usually held in the local Beit Kneset. Rav Menachem Waldman's book, "The Jews of Ethiopia, the Beta Israel Community", helped understand this one. It seems that in Ethiopia, Britot had traditionally been performed in the "Beit Nidah". This structure was usually situated on the outskirts of the village, and this is where the Mother resided throughout the pregnancy. According to their traditions the spilling of blood during a Brit would have rendered the synagogue where it was held to become impure. Their custom was to conduct the naming and the traditional celebrations only on the 40th or 80th day, for on this day the Mother would return back home purified.

During this same period a second major group of Olim arrived with their own problems and challenges. Whereas the Ethiopians were fastidiously holding on to their own way of doing the Brit, the main challenge with the Olim from the Soviet union was that so many of them had never undergone circumcision on the eighth day. Nonetheless, many of these Olim wanted to perform this rite. I remember one such Russian Oleh telling me how he wanted to undergo a Brit Mila before getting married as he did not feel Jewish without one. On another day, I had the unusual experience of accompanying a father and his

two teen-aged sons into the hospital operating room where these unsung heroes of modern Jewish history underwent the Brit Mila one after another.

The Britot of adult Russian Olim upon arrival to the holy land was strangely reminiscent of the events that occurred during the days of Yehoshua as we entered into the land the first time. In Sefer Yehoshua 5:9, after all the Jews had undergone a Brit Mila, G-d turns to Yehoshua stating that: "And Hashem said to Yehoshua - today I have GALOTI, rolled away, the disgrace of Egypt (Cherpat Mitzrayim) from upon you. Therefore the name of that place was called Gilgal to this day."

The Brit, the removal or rolling away of Cherpat Mitzrayim is a necessary condition for entering the Land.

It is high time we too accepted upon ourselves to roll away this disgrace. Ralbag (Rav Levi Ben Gershon) explains that disgrace of cherpat mitzrayim does not only refer to the physical act of circumcision (which has become commonplace practice in western medicine). The Brit signifies our willingness to discard foreign customs and norms. Olim who arrive here after "rolling away", or tearing themselves away from the surrounding culture should be commended for having left Galut behind in order to

come and reenact the scene at Gilgal.



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