



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

TAZRI'A-MITZORA

## **Circumcision: Improving God's Work**

Among the detailed laws in the sidra comes a reminder of the duty of circumcision (Vayikra 12:3), which had been previously promulgated early in B'reishit (Parshat Lech L'cha).

The Midrash Tanchuma (Tazri'a 5) reports that the Roman, Turnus Rufus, asked Rabbi Akiva a good question concerning this mitzva. "If", said the Roman, "your God desires circumcision, why does a child not leave its mother's womb already circumcised?"

Rabbi Akiva was not without an answer. He went back to the story of Creation, in which the sixth and seventh days (B'reishit 1:26-2:3) record the creation of man in the Divine image and the establishment of Shabbat as the day of rest.

Both events, the climax of the work of creation, are later described as B'RIT OLAM - "an everlasting covenant".

This phrase is applied to Shabbat, in Sh'mot 31:16, which tells us LA'ASOT

ET HASHABBAT - "to make Shabbat". It is applied to man, in the law of circumcision in B'reishit 17:7, where Avraham is told, "This is My covenant which you shall observe, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised."

Rabbi Akiva told Turnus Rufus, "The reason why men are not born already circumcised is that the Almighty desired the individual co-operation of every Jew in the perfection of His creation by performing the mitzva of B'RIT MILA.

Similarly, when God says, "The Children of Israel shall keep Shabbat, to observe (literally, 'to make') Shabbat throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant", He means us to make a personal effort to fulfil His purposes by turning Saturday into Shabbat.

It is our effort that completes God's creation of the seventh day and indeed of the week itself.

Through the two mitzvot of circumcision and Shabbat, we affirm our belief in God, we recognise our human role in the world, and we assume our full human dignity as "partners with God in the work of creation".

## **Offerings after Childbirth**

Many questions need to be asked about this week's sidra.

The first is why a woman who has given birth is ritually impure and needs to bring an offering.

Is not procreation the very first of the commandments? Are not children "a heritage from the Lord" (Psalm 127:3)? Is not a mother fulfilling a God-given purpose?

Abravanel suggests the offering is not because of any sin but in thanksgiving to God who brought her safely through the pain and danger of childbirth.

Not only for herself should she be grateful, but on behalf of the child; Rabbi Abba bar Kahana remarks in the Midrash, "The embryo dwells in its mother's womb and the Holy One, blessed be He, watches over it that it does not fall and die. Does this not warrant praise?"

Another Midrash speaks of the wonder of childbirth and the beneficence of the Almighty.

Rabbi Levi says, "The way of the world is, that if someone secretly leaves a purse of silver with another person, and the latter gives back a pound of gold in public, should he not be grateful? Thus it is with the Holy

One, blessed be He. Human beings secretly deposit with Him a drop of fluid, and the Holy One, blessed be He, gives back magnificent, complete human beings in public. Does this not warrant praise?"

The mother's ritual impurity is seven days for a boy and 14 for a girl. Some commentators believe it takes longer to recover from the birth of a girl; a medical view on this assertion would be interesting.

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch thinks the second seven days in the case of a girl takes the place of the MILA of a boy, who is circumcised after the first week of life. **-OZ**

## **Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH**