

A Weekly Byte... Of Isralight (Tazriah)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality **From Rav Binny Freedman**

Some time ago, I received this story on the Internet:

There was a young woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. So as she was getting her things "in order," she contacted her Rabbi and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in.

Everything was in order and the Rabbi was preparing to leave when the young woman suddenly remembered something very important to her.

"There's one more thing," she said excitedly.

"What' that?" came the Rabbi's reply.

"This is very important," the young woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand."

The Rabbi stood looking at the young woman, not knowing quite what to say.

"That surprises you, doesn't it?" the young woman asked.

"Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the Rabbi.

The young woman explained. "My grandmother once told me this story, and from that time on I have always tried to pass along its message to those I love and those who are in need of encouragement.

In all my years of attending socials and dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming...like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful, and with substance!"

So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder, "What's with the fork?" Then I want you to tell them: "Keep your fork, the best is yet to come."

The Rabbi's eyes welled up with tears of joy as he hugged the young woman good-bye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death. But he also knew that the young

woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She had a better grasp of what heaven would be like than many people twice her age, with twice as much experience and knowledge.

*She **knew** that something better was coming. At the funeral people were walking by the young woman's casket and they saw the cloak she was wearing and the fork placed in her right hand. Over and over, the Rabbi heard the question: "What's with the fork?" And over and over he smiled.*

During his message, the Rabbi told the people of the conversation he had with the young woman shortly before she died. He also told them about the fork and about what it symbolized to her. He told the people how he could not stop thinking about the fork and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it either.

He was right. So the next time you reach down for your fork let it remind you, ever so gently, that the best is yet to come.

Cherish the time you have, and the memories you share ... and keep your fork.

Do we live in the past, do we embrace the future, or do we, should we, live in the here and now? Perhaps reality is a combination of all three, and this week's portion, *Tazriah*, offers an interesting perspective on this question.

"... Isha' Ki Tazriah Ve'Yalda' Zachar... U'Va'Yom Ha'Shemini Yimol Be'sar Orlato'."
"And when a woman conceives and gives birth to a (male) baby boy, on the eighth day, his foreskin shall be circumcised." (VaYikra 12:2-3)

This verse is the Biblical source for the mitzvah of circumcision (based on the early commandment to Abraham in Genesis 17), wherein every male Jewish child is circumcised on the eighth day of his birth.

One often meets people (especially new parents!) who are tremendously challenged by the specifics of this mitzvah, and its details must give us pause.

I recall once getting a call from a woman who needed to speak with me. Someone had given her my name, and the message said it was urgent. I was out of the office that morning, and over the course of about six hours, she left no less than ten messages, everywhere she could possibly imagine I might be, finally catching up with me by having our office manager in Israel call the venue where I happened to be giving a class, urging me to call as soon as possible.

It transpired that this woman had given birth to a healthy baby boy a number of days earlier, and wanted her newborn baby to be circumcised in accordance with Jewish tradition. Unfortunately, she had never thought to discuss it at length with her Christian husband, whose reaction to her suggestion was: "You want to do WHAT to my son?"

After much discussion and explanation, this baby, who is of course Jewish, was indeed circumcised, but this new father's questions make a lot of sense.

Why does Judaism ask us to circumcise a newborn baby when he is barely a week old? After all, G-d brought this child into the world, and if G-d wanted him to be different, why didn't G-d create him differently to begin with?

If circumcision is some sort of affirmation of Jewish identity, or even an acceptance of the covenant we have as a people with G-d, why is it done on an area of the body that is so often hidden? Why not a mark on the forehead, where everyone can see it?

For that matter, why is it that only men are circumcised? (Not that I have heard many women complaining about this one!) What is the relationship between this mitzvah and what the male represents in this world?

And of course, one wonders what the significance of the circumcision occurring on the eighth day is; why not on the first birthday? Or the first day Doctors deem it to be safe? (Which of course, in and of itself, is true in any event....)

There is a detail, which is gleaned from this verse that may shed light on the importance, and perhaps even the underlying idea of this mitzvah.

The Talmud, based on the words: “*U’Va’Yom Ha’Shemini “ On the eighth day,(his foreskin shall be circumcised.)”*” explains: “***On that day, even on Shabbat.***” (Shabbat 132a)

In other words, the mitzvah of circumcision, and particularly the fulfillment of this mitzvah on the eighth day of the child's life, is so significant, that it even supersedes Shabbat. Normally, the act of circumcision itself (the cutting of skin, tearing of bandages, and other aspects of a circumcision) would be forbidden on Shabbat (as one of the thirty-nine categories of labor traditionally prohibited on Shabbat), and would result in the circumcision being delayed until Sunday. However, this verse teaches us that even if the eighth day of the child's life falls on Shabbat, we proceed with the circumcision even though it violates some of the cardinal principles of Shabbat.

Why is circumcision so important, that it supersedes Shabbat? Especially when considering that many other important mitzvot do not supersede Shabbat?

For example, I can remember many Shabbatot in the army spent without a *Minyan* (the traditional quorum) and without the ability to read from a Torah scroll, because traditionally, I was not permitted to violate Shabbat by driving my jeep over to a synagogue.

If, on Pesach, one had no matzah, certainly one of the more important mitzvot of the year, or no Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, neither of these critical mitzvot supersede Shabbat, and one is better off missing either of these mitzvot rather than violating Shabbat in order to fulfill them. So why is circumcision different? Why does the circumcision of an eight-day-old baby boy allow us to violate Shabbat, which is such an important mitzvah in Judaism?

Indeed, one might suggest that Shabbat is more than just another mitzvah; Shabbat is actually the soul of the Jewish people. As the verse says:

“*U’vayom Ha’Shevi’i, Shavat, Va’Yinafash.*” Which literally means:
 “*And on the seventh day He rested, and was ‘souled’.*” (Shemot 31:17)

Some translate this word (*Va’Yinafash*) as ‘refreshed’, but the mystical commentaries suggest that on Shabbat, we revive our souls.

Indeed, there are only two other instances when we choose to violate Shabbat, and are indeed obligated to do so. One is when someone’s life is in danger, and the other, strangely enough, is for the sacrifices offered in the Temple, that are regular, daily (or Festival) sacrifices. (*Pesachim 77b*).

While we can easily comprehend why we are allowed to violate Shabbat to save a life, it is still a question that might easily have been resolved otherwise. The Talmud suggests that:

“*It is better to desecrate one Shabbat (by saving a life), and thus be able to celebrate many Shabbatot in the future.*” (*Yoma 84b*)

Thus, one might suggest that the desecration of Shabbat in such an instance is not because life is more sacred than Shabbat, but actually (perhaps) because the celebration of many Shabbatot in the future makes the life worth saving!

Either way, Shabbat is so essential, and so much a part of who we are, that it is as important, perhaps even as sacred as life itself! And while this is certainly a question worthy of discussion, the very fact that Jewish tradition can *entertain* such a question makes the fact that circumcision allows, and perhaps even demands the desecration of Shabbat, something to wonder about.

What is it about both the daily sacrifices and the mitzvah of circumcision, that allow for them alone, to the exclusion of all other mitzvot (saving a life being understood to be a vehicle for fulfilling all mitzvot in the future) to supersede Shabbat?

There is another interesting detail about this law, which may help shed light on this subject.

Although one may indeed desecrate Shabbat to perform a circumcision (assuming the circumcision is in fact being performed on the eighth day), one may only do so if the actions involved could not have been prepared prior to Shabbat. (For example, the foreskin cannot be cut before Shabbat because it is not yet the eighth day.)

However, if one could have prepared before Shabbat, and the only reason we are now forced to desecrate Shabbat, is because we did not prepare ahead of time, then in fact one cannot desecrate Shabbat, and must delay the circumcision. (Mishnah *Pesachim 6:2*; **Rambam** *Hilchot Korban Pesach 1:18*)

For example, if on Shabbat morning, the knife for the circumcision is not in the Synagogue, and one is faced with the question of violating Shabbat by carrying in a public domain (again, one of the thirty-nine categories of labor traditionally prohibited on Shabbat), since one could have taken the knife to the Synagogue (where the circumcision will take place Shabbat morning), one may not violate Shabbat by carrying it, even if this means the circumcision will not take place.

In fact, this is true as well for the sacrifices that allow us to violate Shabbat; anything that could have been prepared before Shabbat cannot be done on Shabbat, even if it means the sacrifice will then not be offered. (I.e. if the animal itself was not brought to the Temple or the wood was not chopped and made ready before Shabbat, it cannot be done on Shabbat....)

All of which leaves us with another interesting question: If Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, the reason we do not blow the Shofar is 'lest we come to carry a Shofar on Shabbat'. (*Rosh Hashanah* 29b) And in fact, this is the reason we do not use the four species on Shabbat, even when the first day of the festival (when the four species are a Biblical commandment) falls on Shabbat, lest we come to carry on Shabbat.

So why did the Rabbis not decree the same here, in the case of circumcision? Why do we not prohibit a circumcision on Shabbat lest someone carry the knife (or other articles) to the circumcision?

Indeed, the commentaries take note of this question, and the **Torah Temimah** suggests (VaYikra 12:3; note 14) that the only reason we do not prohibit circumcision on Shabbat, is because the fact that it supersedes Shabbat is learned directly from a Biblical verse (and anything permitted directly in a Biblical verse cannot subsequently be prohibited by a Rabbinic decree).

Which still leaves us with the question as to why circumcision is so important that the Torah demands its fulfillment, even at the expense of Shabbat, while this is not the case with other important mitzvot?

Perhaps an explanation of the above-mentioned Rabbinic decree (prohibiting certain mitzvot lest we come to carry on Shabbat) will help us to understand why it does not apply on Shabbat, which will lead us to an understanding both of the nature of Shabbat, as well as the nature of circumcision.

Why, indeed, would we be prohibited from fulfilling such crucial mitzvot as the four species or the blowing of the Shofar (on Shabbat), lest we come to carry?

Why indeed, is carrying prohibited on Shabbat? In fact, don't we first need to understand the meaning of Shabbat itself, before exploring the nature of those activities we can or cannot do on Shabbat?

What indeed, is Shabbat all about?

Six days a week we are told we can labor, but:

"...The seventh day is Shabbat for Hashem your G-d." (Shemot 20:9-10)

Most people understand this to mean that for six days we can do whatever we want, but on the seventh day we are somehow meant to desist from all these activities and declare a day for G-d. In fact, however, that is not really what that verse is all about. For six days, G-d gives us a world, and the question is what we will choose to do with it. For six days G-d gives us the opportunity to be partners in making the world a better place to be. But we get so wrapped up in our partnership; it becomes very easy to lose sight of what it is really all about.

For six days, we build our buildings, win our cases, make our deals, and utilize all the skills, materials, and energy at our disposal to make a difference, and effect a change in the world. But one day of the week, we let go of all that, so that we can jump off the racetrack and consider what all this effort is all about.

On Shabbat we remember that we are created, and that our ability to produce and create are gifts, given us by the creator-in-chief, for a reason. Hence, suggests **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch**, on Shabbat we desist from all activities that actually produce a difference in the physical world, because on this day we want to take the time to consider what the production is meant to accomplish. And we remember as well, that we are produced, and not just producers.

Many people feel constrained, and even limited by this idea, but in truth, when we take the time to appreciate the fact that we are created, and that there must therefore be a purpose to our creation, we discover as well, how much Hashem who created us, must love us. And letting go of all the activities that distract us, and cause to get so wrapped up in our selves, actually gives us the time to consider how much love and purpose there is in the world around us, which gives so much more meaning as well to the week that lies ahead.

And this is part of the essence of Shabbat: On Shabbat we direct our energies towards our purpose in this world, and we allow ourselves to connect, on a much deeper level, with the source of all that purpose and joy: Hashem.

Now this idea gives us a much deeper understanding of the common theme based on which the Torah prohibits all the different categories of labor on Shabbat. Basically, we avoid any action that produces a change in the physical world, and this serves as a reminder that for one day a week we want to appreciate the purpose of all the change we can affect in the world the rest of the week.

The one exception to this idea, it seems, is actually the prohibition of carrying on Shabbat. Technically, if one transports an item from a private to a public domain, (in either direction) or indeed, carries an item a certain distance within a public domain, one has transgressed the prohibition against carrying on Shabbat. Yet, in the end, what change has really transpired? If, after carrying a book from my home to the synagogue, I then bring it home with me after services, placing it back on its original bookshelf, what physical change have I produced in the world? And why does this distract me from the purpose of Shabbat, which is to focus on the fact that I am produced, and part of a larger purpose, and not just a producer as we are wont to believe, when caught up in the midst of all of our weekly activities? (In fact, **Tosafot** suggests that carrying is a '*Melacha Geruah*', a labor of deficient constructive quality, for precisely this reason.)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, in one of his *Derashot Le'Shabbat Shuvah*, suggested once that the essence of carrying is a declaration of ownership. When you see me carrying something, you assume it to be mine, and **when I carry an object I am making a statement that it belongs to me. But on Shabbat I am trying to remember that nothing in this world is really mine. In the end, it all belongs to G-d.**

Milton Steinberg (author of *As a Driven Leaf*) said it best: Rabbi Steinberg, a prolific writer, died tragically in his late fifties of a heart attack which was the last and most severe of a number of heart

attacks which left him very weak towards the end of his life. After one of those cardiac events, he was finally discharged from the hospital and was able to attend services Shabbat morning in his Synagogue. His congregation very much wanted to hear him speak, but his weakness prevented him from delivering a full-fledged sermon. However, after being pressed, he did offer this truism:

“Chabek Et Ha’Olam, Ach be’Z’ro’ot Petuchot.” “Embrace the world, but with open arms.”

You have to love life, but you also have to be willing to let it go. We don’t really own this world, we are merely travelers passing through, and the question is what we will choose to do with whatever we are given to work with on our journey.

This, perhaps, is why the Rabbis were so careful about someone not coming to carry on Shabbat, because if Shabbat is all about remembering that everything belongs to G-d, as well as an opportunity to consider what our running all week is really about, then the act of carrying on Shabbat undermines the very essence of the day.

All of which brings us back to circumcision; what is circumcision all about?

When originally giving Abraham the mitzvah of circumcision (in Genesis chap. 17), described as a covenant (a *“Brit”*) we enter with G-d, Hashem says; *“Hithalech Le’fanai’ Ve’Heyeh Tamim”*, *“Walk before me and become Tamim, whole, (or perfect)”*. (Bereishit 17:1) And **Rashi** there quotes the *Midrash*, which suggests that through the mitzvah of circumcision we become whole.

Hashem creates us as imperfect beings, much as He creates the world as an incomplete, imperfect world. Our purpose on this earth is to become partners with G-d in perfecting creation. If G-d had created a perfect and completed world, what purpose would there then be to our existence? It is precisely because we are in an imperfect world, that we can achieve so much by becoming partners in its completion. And while this is true of the entire world, our greatest challenge begins with perfecting ourselves.

Now, the mitzvah of circumcision is focused on the most private aspect of who we are, because the message of circumcision is first and foremost for ourselves.

We live every day with the tension of balancing the physical aspect of who we are, our desires and needs, with the spiritual essence of who we can become. We can allow the physical, animal-like realities we live with to steer us away from our ability to come close to G-d, and thus to our true purpose, or we can harness our physical selves in embracing a higher, more lasting vision.

And we are given this message at the very beginning of our lives, as a mission to all that we can achieve, and all that we can become. (It is not accidental that **Maimonides**, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, suggests that the highest point of sanctity one can achieve in the physical world is the climax of sex, because if we can harness the most physical of activities in partnership with G-d, in creating life, read purpose, then we have accessed our reason for being in this world.)

Incidentally, this is why the verse suggests at this point that we (Abraham) will walk *before* G-d, because Hashem wants us to be active partners with Him in this world. Indeed, it is the male sex drive

which most constantly represents, according to Jewish Mysticism, that same dichotomy which on the one hand can elevate us to be partners in creation, and yet on the other can most distract us from our true purpose, causing us to forget why we are really here, and what our creation is really all about.

Hence, suggests Jewish tradition, the circumcision comes to remind man of his higher calling.

(It is interesting that Judaism suggests that the woman, carrying within her as she does the cycle of life, has less need of this reminder of the purpose of creation and the meaning of life, because the cycle she is in essence a part of does not allow her as easily to forget that she is indeed created for a purpose. Hence, the lack of a need for a woman to undergo an experience similar to circumcision.)

And if this is what circumcision is all about, it becomes easier to understand why we circumcise our children even at the expense of Shabbat. Because the message Shabbat gives us in time, is in essence the same message that circumcision gives us in our physical bodies: the reminder of why we are really here, and the challenge of deciding what we will choose to do with all that we are given, be it the gift of life as represented by our physical reality, or the gift of time, which Shabbat is meant to allow us to explore.

Indeed, the Torah chooses not to be concerned about carrying on Shabbat (and the resulting message that we don't really own anything in this world), because the message of circumcision is that we don't even really own our bodies; they are the gift Hashem gives us with which to affect a change and make a difference in this world.

(And in fact, as we have discussed in our *Tastings of Torah* on the portion of *VaYikra*, this is essentially the message of the sacrifices as well, which are meant to impart this message (in the Temple) in its relationship to physical *space*.)

And this is also part of why the mitzvah of circumcision is on the eighth day, after a child has, by definition, experience the message of one Shabbat.

Lastly, one of the essential messages of Shabbat is the challenge of learning to live in the moment. We spend so much time stuck in where we have been, or what we have done, and we expend as well so much energy on where we are going, and where we expect to be, that we often miss the joy, as well as the opportunity, of appreciating where we are.

When we go out to dine at a fine restaurant, we do not hurry to eat our dinner in order to get to the end. A fine dining experience is about appreciating every bite and every morsel. Watch how a wine connoisseur appreciates a fine bouquet of wine, he or she sips it slowly, allowing it to challenge and yet soothe every taste bud, reveling in the culinary experience, and enjoying every sip, and every moment. All week long, we rush to meet our deadlines, and get the job done. But on Shabbat, we take a day to appreciate where we are, and all we have been given, as well as all we have accomplished in the past week.

Reality is not about the past or the future; the past is already gone, and the future is not yet here; there is only now. And if I can really live in the now, and really appreciate as well as tap into the enormous

potential of the now, then the meaning of the past becomes clear, and the potential of the future grows with each passing moment.

Circumcision, however, is all about the future. It challenges us not to get stuck in the now of our physical reality, looking ahead to all that we can become. An eight-day-old baby has almost no past, and very little present, he has much growing to do before he will have much to offer in the present. Rather, this mitzvah challenges us not to merely see the crying, helpless, baby, with so very little to contribute, but to see instead all that he can become. To be sure, this baby has experienced one Shabbat, because we must learn to grab and squeeze the potential out of every moment. But at the same time, the mitzvah of circumcision, coming as it does on the second Shabbat, teaches us as well, never to become so immersed in the present, that we lose sight of the magnificent future that is always there for us to create, in the context of the partnership we have been given with Hashem in this world.

With all the challenges of the present, may Hashem bless us to both create the world in this moment as it is meant to be, and to never lose the ability to see the wonderful future just ahead, if we will only choose to create it, and embrace it.

Hang on to your forks.

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman