



The Three-Ply Phenomenon: The Mitzvah of Milah the Attribute of Wholeheartedness and the Letter “Hei” Added to the Name of Avraham Avinu

This week we read parshas Lech Lecha. Hence, it is fitting that we explore one of the most fundamental and important mitzvos in the Torah—the mitzvah of “milah.” It established a covenant between HKB”H, Avraham Avinu, and his offspring—the people of Yisrael—for all eternity. Here are the pertinent pesukim (Bereishis 17, 1):

”ויהי אברם בן תשעים שנה ותשע שנים, וירא ה' אל אברם ויאמר אליו אני אל שדי התהלך לפני והיה תמים, ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך וארכה אותך במאד מאד... ולא יקרא עוד את שמך אברם והיה שמך אברהם כי אב המון גוים נתתיך... והקמותי את בריתי ביני ובינך ובין זרעך אחריך לדורותם לכרית עולם להיות לך לאלקים ולזרעך אחריך.”

When Avram was ninety-nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him, “I am Kel Shakkai; walk before Me and be ‘tamim’ (complete, perfect, wholehearted). I will set My covenant between Me and you, and I will increase you most exceedingly.” Avram fell upon his face, and G-d spoke with him saying, “As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be a father of a multitude of nations; your name shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations; I will make you most exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you; and kings shall descend from you. I will uphold My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you, throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant, to be a G-d to you and to your offspring after you.”

Let us focus on the words: “התהלך לפני והיה תמים”—walk before Me and be ‘tamim’ (complete, wholehearted). Why was this a prerequisite for this sacred mitzvah? Why did HKB”H define the mitzvah to Avraham Avinu in these terms? Does this mean that prior to entering this covenant and receiving this mitzvah, Avraham was lacking? Let us introduce a pertinent passage from the Gemara (Nedarim 32a):

”תניא רבי אומר, גדולה מילה שאין לך מי שנתעסק במצות כאברהם אבינו, ולא נקרא תמים אלא על שם מילה, שנאמר התהלך לפני והיה תמים, וכתוב ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך.”

A Baraisa was taught: Rebbe says: Great is “milah,” for you have no one that involved himself in mitzvos to the extent that Avraham Avinu did. Yet, he was not described as complete except on account of (the mitzvah of) “milah.” As it is stated: “Walk before Me and be complete.” And it is written (immediately afterwards): “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you.”

It behooves us to explore the profound implications of the term “תמים”—being complete, perfect, and wholehearted—a character trait that cannot be achieved without fulfilling the mitzvah of “milah.” We will also explain why HKB”H added the letter “hei” to Avraham’s name specifically in connection with the mitzvah of “milah.”

**“Milah” Is the Key to Fulfilling the Mitzvah of:
“Be ‘tamim’ with Hashem, your G-d”**

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by referring to the commentary of the Ramban. He asserts that HKB”H commanded Avraham Avinu: **“Walk before Me and be ‘tamim’”—in order to fulfill the mitzvas aseil of (Devarim 18, 13): “תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך”—be “tamim” with Hashem, your G-d.** Now, we find a tremendous chiddush in the incredible teachings of the Chasam Sofer (Lech Lecha): The mitzvah of “milah” constitutes a tikun for the cheit of Adam HaRishon. As a result of the cheit, HKB”H made “kutnot ohr”—garments of skin—for Adam and Chava, as it is written (Bereishis 3, 21): **“ויעש ה' אלקים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם”—Hashem Elokim made for Adam and his wife garments of skin, and he clothed them.** By fulfilling the mitzvah of “milah” and removing the foreskin, we correct the flaw of “kutnot ohr:” (Women correct this flaw by purifying themselves of the status of “niddah.”)

To explain the remarks of the Chasam Sofer in greater depth, we will refer to the Zohar hakadosh (Bereishis 36b, Pekudei 229b):

When Adam HaRishon was in Gan Eden, he was dressed in garb appearing like a heavenly creature; it was the garb of heavenly light. When he was evicted from Gan Eden, and he required garments appropriate for Olam HaZeh, it is written: “Hashem G-d made for Adam and his wife garments of skin (כתנות עור), and He clothed them.” At first, they were garments of light (אור)—light from the heavenly light that served Gan Eden . . . When he was evicted from there, he required a different garment; then Hashem G-d made for Adam and Chava garments of skin (עור).

Concerning this matter, we learn in the Tikunei Zohar (Tikun 58, 92b) that the garments of skin HKB”H made for Adam and Chava after the sin, were made from the skin of the nachash: **“ויעש ה' אלקים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם, בקדמיתא — at first, they were garments of light; but after they sinned, they were garments of skin — from skin that was the skin of the nachash.** This matter is discussed many times in the Zohar hakadosh and in the writings of our master, the Arizal. In the process of the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as,” the primeval serpent—the “nachash hakadmoni”—succeeded in introducing its

contamination into Adam, Chava, and all living creatures. As a consequence, the kedushah of the body was corrupted and perverted. This is the message conveyed by the Tikunei Zohar just cited. Man’s body originally transmitted the divine light of Gan Eden, but due to the contamination of the nachash, it was corrupted and transformed into “garments of skin” related to the skin of the nachash.

According to the Zohar hakadosh (Sazria 44a), the removed foreskin should be placed in a bowl filled with earth, since the foreskin stems from the contamination of the primeval serpent, whose food and sustenance is the dust of the earth. This helps us better appreciate the sacred words of the Chasam Sofer. In truth, HKB”H provided garments of skin to clothe the entire bodies of Adam and Chava; however, He did not provide garments of skin to cover the entire bodies of their offspring and descendants; He left the skin representing the contamination of the nachash only in the area of the foreskin. Thus, by fulfilling the mitzvah of “milah,” which involves removing the contamination of the nachash, the body is purified, so that it can be sanctified and transformed into **“כתנות אור”—a body of light.**

With this in mind, we can make sense of a statement in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 38b). It says that Adam HaRishon: **“מושיך — בערלתו היה”—he would pull on his foreskin.** The brilliant author of the Ben Ish Chai, in Ben Yehoyada, his commentary on the allegories and homiletic passages in the Shas, interprets this to mean that the effects of the contamination of the nachash—symbolized by the foreskin—extended to the offspring of Adam HaRishon.

Clearly, this gibes magnificently with the insight of the Chasam Sofer. The foreskin that is removed from every Jewish male infant by the mitzvah of “milah” is associated with the contamination the nachash introduced into Adam HaRishon and all future human beings that were contained within him at the time of the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as.” This explains very nicely why Adam HaRishon was born circumcised, without a foreskin. For, before he sinned, his body was not contaminated by the nachash. After the sin, however, the nachash infected him with its contamination causing him to have a foreskin. Hence, the Gemara teaches: **“He would pull on his foreskin”—**indicating that his sin caused the appearance of the foreskin due to the contamination of the nachash.

Avraham Avinu Was Commanded to Remove the Contamination of the Nachash

Following this line of reasoning, we can explain why HKB”H commanded Avraham Avinu to perform the mitzvah of “milah.” It is because he was the first of our forefathers to begin the process of tikun for the sin of Adam HaRishon and the damaging impact it had on creation. Let us present a pertinent Midrash (B.R. 14, 6):

“And Hashem G-d formed man,” in the merit of Avraham. Rabbi Levi said: “The biggest man among the giants” (Yehoshua 14, 15) refers to Avraham. Why does the passuk call him “big” (“great”)? Because he was worthy to be created before Adam HaRishon. Yet, HKB”H said: “Maybe he will go astray and there will not be anyone to make amends after him. Instead, I will create Adam first; so that if he blunders, Avraham will come and make amends for him.” . . . Similarly, why did HKB”H create Avraham in the midst of the generations? So, that he would support both the generations before him and the generations after him.

It was for this reason that Avraham was born with a foreskin, and HKB”H chose the mitzvah of “milah” specifically for him. Since he began the tikun of Adam HaRishon, whose foreskin developed as a consequence of partaking from the prohibited Eitz HaDa’as, it was incumbent upon Avraham to remove the remnant of the contamination of the nachash. The mitzvah of “milah” separates the evil and contamination of the nachash from the good of our holy “Bris” and relationship with HKB”H. Thus, Avraham Avinu paved the way for all Jews to separate the evil from the good by performing the mitzvah of “milah.” This is the implication of the formula of the berachah recited after the “milah”: **“וְצִאֲנוּ חֶתֶם בְּאוֹת בְּרִית:”** **“קודש”—and his offspring he stamped with the sign of the holy covenant (“Bris kodesh”).**

Torah Wisdom Can Only Be Achieved in the Merit of the Mitzvah of “Milah”

It is with great pleasure that we can apply what we have learned to better comprehend the amazing story presented in the Midrash (S.R. 30, 12) about Onkelos. He chose to convert and be circumcised, so that he could study Torah and

acquire its wisdom. A lengthier version of this story is found in the Tosafists’ Da’as Zekeinim (Mishpatim). Here is the gist of the story: **Onkelos the Convert was the nephew of the Caesar, Hadrian. He wanted to convert but feared his uncle’s reaction. So, he said to his uncle, “I want to start a business.” His uncle responded, “Perhaps you need silver or gold. My treasure-house is open to you.” Onkelos said, “I want to go out into the world, to become wise, and to become familiar with the ways of other people. Give me an idea for a business.” Hadrian replied, “Choose a business that is in decline that will eventually recover, and you will profit.”**

He went to Eretz Yisrael and requested from the sages to learn Torah before getting circumcised. They told him that words of Torah are only retained by someone who has been circumcised. He proceeded to get circumcised, and he learned much Torah. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua found him and noticed that he looked different. They remarked to one another that Onkelos has learned Torah. Immediately, upon coming to them, he began to ask many questions.

He went back to his uncle, Hadrian. Hadrian said to him, **“Why do you look different?”** He replied, **“Because I have learned Torah and additionally, I have been circumcised.”** Hadrian asked him, **“Who advised you to do so?”** He answered, **“You did. You told me to engage in a business that that has declined and will eventually rise. So, I went to each and every nation, and I did not find such a downtrodden nation as Yisrael. And they are destined to rise, as Yeshayah said (Yeshayah 49, 7): “Thus said Hashem, the Redeemer of Yisrael and their Holy One . . .”**

He slapped him on his cheeks and asked him again, **“Why did you do this?”** Onkelos answered that he wanted to learn Torah. He said to him, **“You should have studied Torah without getting circumcised.”** He explained to his uncle that it is impossible to learn without ‘milah,’ as it states (Tehillim 147, 19): **“He relates His words to Yaakov, His statutes and His judgments to Yisrael”—(implies that Hashem only relates them) to someone who is circumcised like Yaakov. And it is written (ibid. 20): “He did not do so for any other nation; such judgments—they know them not (ב”ל).”** The term **ב”ל** indicates that they (the other nations)

are incapable of learning the Torah that begins with the letter “beis” and ends with the letter “lamed” . . .

The Contamination of the Nachash Ceased Momentarily at Har Sinai but Returned with the Cheit HaEigel”

I would like to propose a wonderful explanation for the association of the mitzvah of “milah” with the acquisition of the Torah. The Gemara (Shabbas 146a) teaches us that although the primeval serpent infected mankind and all of creation with its contamination and corruption; nevertheless, its negative influences ceased at Har Sinai: **“ישראל שעמדו על הר — סיני פסקה זוהמתן, עובדי כוכבים שלא עמדו על הר סיני לא פסקה זוהמתן”** **Yisrael, who stood at Har Sinai, their contamination ceased; the idolaters, who were not present at Har Sinai, their contamination did not cease.** They specify that the contamination of the nachash was removed from Yisrael at Har Sinai, even before they received the Torah. Otherwise, they would not have been able to receive the Torah. Additionally, it was essential that the corrupt, evil nachash have no part or parcel in the receiving of the Torah. (It appears that Yisrael who were born in the interim, prior to the “cheit ha’eigel,” were born without a foreskin. The command to perform “milah” only applied to those born prior to arriving at Har Sinai.) After the “cheit ha’eigel,” however, the contamination of the nachash returned in the form of the foreskin; so, the mitzvah of “milah” became necessary, once again, to remove it.

Now, this enlightens us as to the connection between the mitzvah of “milah” and the mitzvah of being **“tamim’ (wholehearted) with Hashem, your G-d.”** As explained, this is why HKB”H said to Avraham Avinu: **“Go before Me and be tamim.”** For, it is evident that the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as” is the root of all sins. That sin resulted from Adam and Chava not following HKB”H wholeheartedly. Had they done so, they would have obeyed Him unconditionally and would not have fallen prey to the lies and deceptive ploy of the nachash (Bereishis 3, 5): **“כי יודע אלקים כי ביום אכלכם ממנו ונפקחו עיניכם —for G-d knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like G-d, knowing good and bad.**

This then is the message HKB”H was conveying to Avraham when he commanded him to perform the mitzvah

of “milah”: **“Go before Me and be tamim.”** By removing the contamination that the nachash injected into Adam HaRishon and all of mankind, you will be able to fulfill the mitzvah of: **“Be tamim with Hashem, your G-d.”** You will be able to serve Hashem perfectly and wholeheartedly, without any ulterior motives, doubts, or questions, which are due solely to the contamination of the nachash.

Yisrael Received the Torah in the Merit of Being Wholehearted

Continuing onward on this sublime path, let us now focus on what Onkelos the Convert explained to his uncle, Hadrian Caesar: It is impossible to study Torah and attain its knowledge and wisdom, if one has not fulfilled the mitzvah of “milah” properly and halachically. Let us refer to the Gemara (ibid. 88a):

“ההוא צדוקי דחזייה לרבא דקא מעיין בשמעתיא ויתבה אצבעתא דידיה תותי כרעא וקא מייץ בהו וקא מבוען אצבעתיה דמא. אמר ליה עמא פזיזא דקדמיתו פומיכו לאודניכו אכתי בפחזותיכו קיימיתו ברישא איבעיא לכו למשמע אי מציתו קבליתו, ואי לא לא קבליתו. אמר ליה אגן דסגינן בשלימותא כתיב בן תומת ישרים תנחם הנך אינשי דסגן בעלילותא כתיב בהו וסלף בוגדים ישרם.”

A particular Tzadduki saw Rava engrossed in his studies; his fingers were lodged beneath his legs; he was crushing them with his legs, and his fingers oozed blood. He said to him (the Tzadduki to Rava): You are an impetuous people who placed your mouths before your ears (by declaring “na’aseh” prior to “nishma,” agreeing to obey the precepts of the Torah before hearing if you could even live up to your rash declaration); you still maintain your impetuous nature. First, you should have heard if the demands of the Torah are something you could live by, and if not, you should not have accepted it. He (Rava) answered him: Regarding us who followed Him wholeheartedly (trusting that he would not require of us anything that was beyond our capabilities), it is written (Mishlei 11, 3): “The innocence of the upright will guide them.” Regarding those people who find numerous excuses (for not obeying the precepts of the Torah), it is written (ibid.): “But the corruption of the faithless will despoil them.”

It appears that we can explain Rava’s response in greater depth based on the passuk (Devarim 33, 2): **“ה’ מסיני בא וזרח”**

Hashem came from Sinai, and He shone forth to them from Seir; He appeared from Har Paran, and He came with some of the myriads of the holy. Rashi explains: **He presented it to the children of Eisav, so that they would have the opportunity to accept the Torah; but they did not want it. He also went to Har Paran and presented it there to the children of Yishmael, so that they would have the opportunity to accept it; but they did not want it.**

These events are described in greater detail in Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (Chapter 41): Apparently, when HKB"H took the Torah to the children of Eisav on Mount Se'ir, they inquired as to what was written in it. HKB"H told them (Shemos 20, 13): **"לא תרצח"—you shall not kill.** They immediately refused to receive the Torah, claiming that they did not want to relinquish the berachah Eisav received from Yitzchak (Bereishis 27, 40): **"ועל חרבך תחיה"—you will live by your sword.** From there, He went to the children of Yishmael on Mount Paran. They also wanted to know what was written in the Torah before making a commitment. To them HKB"H replied (Shemos 20, 13): **"לא תגנוב"—you shall not steal.** They responded that they were unwilling to abandon the ways of their ancestors, who kidnapped Yosef, ultimately landing him in Mitzrayim, as it states (Bereishis 40, 15): **"כי גנוב גונבתי מארץ העברים—for I was indeed kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews.** Then, HKB"H visited all the nations of the world offering them the opportunity to receive the Torah. They all inquired as to its contents. He told them (Shemos 20, 3): **"לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני"—you shall not have any other gods before My Presence.** They all refused the Torah on the grounds that they were unwilling to abandon the beliefs of their ancestors, who worshipped avodah-zarah. Instead, they said to give Hashem's Torah to His people, as per the passuk (Tehillim 29, 11): **"Hashem will give might to His people, Hashem will bless His people with shalom."**

In the Merit of the Mitzvah of "Milah" It Is Possible to Attain the Torah Which Was Given in the Merit of Wholeheartedness and Perfection

We see from here that the reason the nations of the world were not willing to accept the Torah was because they did not go wholeheartedly with HKB"H. They did not have the

faith in Him that if He was willing to give them the Torah, He would most certainly help them fulfill its precepts. Instead, they pondered the future to discern whether or not they could abide by the Torah's precepts. This prompted them to ask HKB"H what was written in the Torah. To which HKB"H replied to each nation respectively, citing the particular mitzvah that would be difficult for that nation to comply with. Consequently, they relinquished any claim to the Torah and refused to accept it.

In stark contrast, when HKB"H came to bestow the Torah upon Yisrael at Har Sinai and sent Moshe Rabeinu to check and see if Yisrael were ready and willing to receive the Torah, they did not make any such inquiries. Instead, without hesitation, they declared "na'aseh" prior to "nishma" (Shemos 24, 7): **"כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע"**. In other words, first of all, we accept upon ourselves **"נעשה"**—to do whatever HKB"H commands us to do; and, subsequently, **"ונשמע"**—to discover what HKB"H's will desires of them.

This then is the significance of Rava's response to the Tzadduki: **"Regarding us who followed Him wholeheartedly** (trusting that he would not require of us anything that was beyond our capabilities), **it is written** (Mishlei 11, 3): **"The innocence of the upright will guide them."** Rashi comments: **We followed Him wholeheartedly like those who are motivated by ahavah.** The reason we proclaimed "na'aseh" prior to "nishma" and did not ask questions beforehand was because we followed Him wholeheartedly. We believed sincerely that if He wanted to give us the Torah, it was clear that we possessed the capacity to fulfill all of the mitzvos written in it.

With this understanding, we can better comprehend why the contamination of the nachash that infected Yisrael ceased when they stood at Har Sinai, even before they received the Torah. Recall that that contamination caused Adam and Chava to investigate other options; they sinned, because they lacked the characteristic of wholeheartedness. So, if Yisrael were still infected with this contamination and lack of wholeheartedness, they would not have been able to accept the Torah without any misgivings as to their ability to abide by it.

This illuminates for us what Onkelos the Convert asserted to his uncle, Hadrian Caesar. He explained to him that it is

impossible to study Torah and to acquire its knowledge without fulfilling the mitzvah of “milah.” For, without removing the foreskin, it is impossible to rid oneself of the contamination of the nachash that blurs the mind with doubts and questions. In that situation, one cannot attain Torah knowledge that Yisrael merited solely on account of their midah of wholeheartedness. They accepted the Torah absolutely, without questioning their ability to uphold it and abide by its tenets.

Based on what we have learned, it gives me great pleasure to now explain why HKB”H added the letter “hei” to Avraham’s name in conjunction with the mitzvah of “milah.” The Zohar hakadosh (Pinchas 216b) teaches us that the “hei” added to Avraham’s name alludes to the “hei” with which this world was created. Regarding the creation of the world, it is written (Bereishis 2, 4): “אלה תולדות השמים והארץ בהבראם”—these are the products of the heavens and the earth when they were created--בהבראם.” The Rabbis expounded in the Midrash

(B.R. 12, 10): The term בהבראם teaches us that בה' בראם—that HKB”H created the heavens and the earth with the letter “hei.” The Zohar adds that the letter “hei,” with a gematria of five, represents the five books of the Torah—indicating that the world was created with the five books of the Torah.

Hence, when HKB”H commanded Avraham Avinu to perform the mitzvah of “milah,” He said to him: **“Go before Me and be ‘tamim.’”** For, in the merit of removing the contaminating influence of the nachash, the inclination to question the legitimacy of mitzvos, you will be able to fulfill the mitzvah of: “תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך”—to serve Hashem wholeheartedly. In the merit of this attribute: **“I will set My covenant between Me and you, and I will increase you most exceedingly . . . and your name shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham.”** In the merit of serving Hashem wholeheartedly, Yisrael will be privileged to receive the Torah comprised of five books.



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In honor and Zechut of my Eshet Chayil, Sapir bat Vered and our children, Yosef Elkana, Ezra and Sophia Shireen. May they all have 120 years of perfect and endless health, happiness, success, growth, strength, proximity to Hashem, Beracha, Ahava and Shalom BH.

All the love in the world, Daniel Aryeh Ohebshalom

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