

Mussar HaTorah

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Parashas Tetzave

How do we know that a baby boy is circumcised on the eighth day?

THE MIDRASH TANCHUMA on this week's *parasha* (Tetzave 1) opens with a question: How do we know that a baby boy is circumcised on the eighth day? The Midrash answers that we learn it from the *bris* of our forefather Yitzchak, which was on the eighth day. The commentary Anaf Yosef asks the obvious question: Why does the Midrash bring a proof from Avraham's giving a *bris* to Yitzchak, the Midrash should have brought the proof from the explicit *pasuk* in the Torah (Vayikra 12:3) that says a baby boy is circumcised on the eighth day? The Anaf Yosef answers that one may think the explicit mention of the eighth day was just a deadline. A person that is a *zariz* – diligent to fulfill a *mitzvah* – might mistakenly think that it would be an improvement to do the *bris* even before the eighth day. To dispel this notion, the Midrash tells us that even Avraham Avinu – a *zariz* par excellence – did not advance the day of the *bris* before the eighth day. In this way we can be certain that a *bris* should not be performed early or later than the eighth day (except later, in the case of illness).

A circumcision during the first week of a baby's life would not be a *bris milah*

Certainly, there are alternate, albeit mistaken, interpretations of the verses dealing with *bris milah*. The Anaf Yosef's answer explains to us that the sole reason one might take "the wrong turn" in reading the *pasuk* would be a motivation of *z'rizus* – zeal and eagerness to do a *mitzvah*. Let us bear in mind that performing a *bris* before the eighth day would be a serious deviation from the Torah's true commandment. In fact, a circumcision during the first week of a baby's life would not be a *bris milah*; it would be unnecessary, even dangerous surgery on a newborn infant without any merit of a *mitzvah* to protect him. How could *z'rizus*, a very positive character trait, applied with a sincere and pure heart, cause one to diverge so far from what the Torah truly requires?

How did the great tzadikim of the past act in similar situations?

Any *midah* can be used by the *yetzer hara* to corrupt one's actions. Even the holiest intentions can, at times, lead us astray. Sometimes, the most serious violations can be the result of individuals who feel they are acting "for the sake of heaven." This concept can be frightening to contemplate. Even with our purest intentions, we can cross boundaries and stray from the correct path. Should we be paralyzed by self-doubt and always fear that we can't trust ourselves?

This very same Midrash advises us how to counteract this danger: Look back to our past, to earlier generations. Ask yourself: How did the great *tzadikim* of the past act in similar situations? Why didn't they comport themselves according to my "novel" idea? In this case, for example, Avraham Avinu did not feel it was appropriate to perform Yitzchak's *bris* early, so I should suspect that perhaps my application of the trait of diligence is incorrect. Similarly, the Chovos HaLevavos (Yichud HaMaaseh 5) warns us not to stray from the path of our forefathers and not to innovate without consulting and comparing with the behavior of earlier generations: "For there is no idea that you will contemplate which they did not contemplate before you, and analyzed all the positive and negative results."

Let us humbly recognize our limitations, even with the holiest and purest of motivations, and think twice before making any innovations. May we recognize the greatness of our ancestors and use their wisdom as a guide for our lives, so that we can be confident that all our efforts will not only have sincere motivations, but will result in deeds that sanctify Hashem's Name, the ultimate purpose of our lives, and of all creation.