



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת לך לך תשס"ט • Parshas Lech Lecha 5769

SMARTER THAN ARISTOTLE

In praise of the *mitzvah* of *milah*, the Mishnah in Nedarim (3:11) makes the following statement:

רבי אומר, גדולה מילה, שכל המצוות שעשה אברהם אבינו לא נקרא שלם, עד שמל, שנאמר (בראשית יז), התהלך לפני והיה תמים.

“Rebbi said: The greatness of circumcision is demonstrated by the fact that despite the countless number of *mitzvos* Avraham Avinu had already fulfilled, he was not considered “complete” until he was circumcised; as the *possum* says (when introducing the commandment of circumcision in this week’s *parshah*): ‘Walk before Me, and you shall be complete,’ (*Bereishis* 17:1).”

Let us keep in mind that Avraham Avinu had become the paradigm of righteousness long before this point. Despite being raised in a world of idolatry, he was able to recognize the true Creator of the world at the incredibly young age of three. His faith only grew from that point, as he reached ever higher levels in his devotion to Hashem. What exactly was he missing that could only be completed through this particular *mitzvah*?

We would like to suggest a possible explanation by first taking a deeper look at the remarkable childhood feat of Avraham Avinu.

BOYS AND PHILOSOPHERS

How, indeed, does a mere child discover such monumental truths completely on his own?

A similar question was posed by R’ Elchonon Wasserman (*Kovetz Ma’amarim, first section*). One of the most fundamental obligations in Judaism is that of *emunah* (belief): belief in Hashem, in the

Torah, in the Afterlife, etc. One who does not accept the basic tenets of belief (Heaven forefend) is considered a heretic and forfeits his portion in the World to Come (*see Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 10:1).

R’ Elchonon asks: the obligations of the Torah become incumbent on a Jew as soon as he reaches the age of maturity (thirteen for boys, twelve for girls). Included in these obligations, of course, is the requirement to believe, as stated above. Throughout the ages, there have been, unfortunately, many people who did not accept such basic principles as belief in the Creator, great thinkers among them. Even Aristotle – whose intellectual prowess was characterized by the Rambam as being just one level below that of prophecy – did not believe. Yet the Torah requires mere thirteen-year-old boys – with even mediocre intelligence – to submit to these principles of faith. And if they don’t, they are subject to the most severe of spiritual punishments. How can mere children be held accountable to conclude what even the greatest philosophers could not?

NO BRAINER

The truth of the matter is – R’ Elchonon explains – *emunah* is elementary. Anyone with even a minimal amount of intelligence and intellectual honesty knows – beyond the shadow of a doubt – that there is a Creator. As R’ Akiva pointed out, just as a garment testifies to a manufacturer and a house was obviously built by a builder, the unfathomably complex, wondrous, and beautiful world in which we live bears clear witness to the existence of an Omnipotent Designer (*Midrash Temurah*).

It should now be easier to understand how such weighty obligations rest on youngsters and even how a young child could attain such revelations. Even a kid can figure out that a building was made by a

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builder; why should the *whole world* be any different? On the contrary; the world is filled with countless billions of wonders, each one heaping on more and more testimony that Creation was fashioned by the Creator (we will elaborate more on this aspect next week, *im yirtzeh Hashem*).

What remains to be clarified, however, is the problem of the “intelligent” heretics. If these ideas are so easily grasped, how did the likes of Aristotle miss the boat?

BRIBERY

To this, R' Elchonon points to the Torah's prohibition, addressed to judges, against taking bribes: “Do not accept bribes; for bribery blinds the eyes of wise men...” (*Devarim 16:19*).

We see from here an amazing reality, a steadfast rule that applies not only to the courtroom, but also to the world in general. When personal benefit stands in the

way, *it is impossible to remain impartial*. “For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise...” When a judge receives even a miniscule gift, his judgment will automatically be skewed. And so it is when an individual forms his world outlook.

There is, so to speak, a “downside” to *emunah*. Once an individual admits to the existence of the Creator, he can no longer do anything and everything he wants! No longer can a person merely follow his animalistic inclinations and fulfill all of his whims and passions. He must follow a code of morals and law, in keeping with the Will of the Creator.

In other words, the pleasures of the world serve as a form of “bribery” to a person, robbing him of his ability to think and see things clearly. That, explains R' Elchonon, is how an Aristotle and scores of others can fail to recognize the obvious: the existence of the Creator. The thought of having to curb their inherent desires is a distasteful one for them, and their thinking is clouded as a result.

BACK TO MILAH

Perhaps this is the facet that Avraham needed for “completion.” Without a doubt, *emunah* was Avraham's forte, as he possessed a faith stronger than we can imagine. Yet Hashem desired for Avraham's faith to be absolutely perfect, unhindered by even the slightest distraction.

The Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim, 3:49*) illuminates the idea of *bris milah*, attributing to it powers of moderation. Apparently, *milah* has the effect of curbing and mitigating the intensity of one's passions and materialistic desires. As we have seen, these factors are obstacles to *emunah* – “bribes” that tarnish a person's vision. As such, their removal would clear the way to a perfect faith.

Through the act of *bris milah*, Avraham gained complete control over the passions of his entire physical body (see *Nedarim 32b*). By doing so, he was free from those elements that could jeopardize or minimize one's *emunah* (Heaven forbid). His faith was now total; he was complete.

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