

Parsha Ponders

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Purifying our ways and ourselves¹

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Speak to the Children of Israel, saying: A woman who conceives and gives birth to a baby boy will be ritually impure for seven days; like the days of her monthly period she will be impure. On the eighth day [the baby's] flesh shall be circumcised. For thirty-three days [the mother] shall remain in her state of purity...²

This week's *parsha* deals with many types of ritual impurity. It begins by describing what happens when a woman gives birth to a baby boy. She becomes impure for a week, upon which she can then immerse in a *mikveh*, becoming pure again. Her baby has a *bris milah* on the eighth day. The Torah then says that for thirty-three days the woman has a presumed status of ritual purity. The Torah then proceeds to describe what happens when she gives birth to a baby girl. What's unusual is the Torah mentions the *mitzvah* of *bris milah* here, of all places. It seemingly has no relevance to a *parsha* dealing with ritual purity. Why is this the place to put it? As well, why was this *mitzvah* sandwiched in between the verses describing the woman's ritual purity status, interrupting the flow of the verses?

Why does the Torah begin by saying: "when a woman conceives"? It would have been sufficient in this context to simply say: "when a woman gives birth to a boy"³. The *Midrash* explains⁴ what this is coming to teach us: The verse mentions the conception of the baby to emphasize the significance of the pregnancy period. It's not a simple stage where the baby simply develops from a fetus to a fully-formed human being. The whole process is full of miracles⁵. Hashem takes an ordinary cell in private and provides with a wonderful soul and displays it in public. There are so many complications that could happen during the development of the baby. Throughout the pregnancy, Hashem protects the fetus so that it can fully develop. The woman's body provides it the perfect environment to grow and be sustained. This continues until it is finally born, with all of its limbs where they should be, and with all of its senses in tact. All of this happened with extra Divine supervision. The Torah mentions a woman conceiving so that we'll contemplate all that went into the development of this child, from conception until birth. We will consequently be more careful to observe Hashem's *mitzvos*, just like He was so careful to observe the development of this child.

A wicked non-Jew once asked Rabbi Akiva⁶: If G-d is so perfect and He desires that Jews be circumcised, why weren't humans born without a foreskin? Rabbi Akiva responded to him that Hashem gave us the *mitzvos* only so that we'll refine and perfect⁷ ourselves⁸. Even though it is clear that when a baby is born, every part of their body serves some purpose, and that everything was designed with precision and perfection, boys are born with this undesired foreskin. If a person contemplates all of this, they'll soon

¹ Based on Be'er Yosef to Leviticus 12:2-4

² Leviticus *loc. cit.*

³ See Niddah 27b, brought by Rashi *ad. loc.*, for a different explanation

⁴ Vayikra Rabbah 14:2-3; Midrash Tanchuma *Tazria* § 3; Tanchuma Yashan *Tazria* § 4

⁵ See the above *Midrashim* for a long list of miracles

⁶ Midrash Tanchuma *Tazria* § 5; Tanchuma Yashan *Tazria* § 7

⁷ לצרף, also means to purify (usually used in reference to fine metals)

⁸ This phrase also appears elsewhere in many places, such as Bereishis Rabbah 44:1, Vayikra Rabbah 13:3, Midrash Tanchuma *Shemini* § 7, 8, Tanchuma Yashan *Shemini* § 12, Midrash Tehillim § 18

realize that the only explanation for the *mitzvah* to remove it is to perfect the child. Otherwise, Hashem could have made the baby without this foreskin, avoiding the problem altogether. We see this with Avraham. When he was commanded by Hashem to circumcise himself, Hashem told him that through this he would become perfect⁹. This is not only referring to a physical perfection, but a spiritual one as well.

This is why the Torah wrote the *mitzvah* of *bris milah* at this exact point. The Torah's mentioning the conception of the child, as already stated, will lead to contemplating all the Divine oversight that went into its formation. So too when it is born, the parents will be filled with awe at the beauty and form of their new baby. All the thought that went into its design will lead them to realize the purpose of the *mitzvah* of *bris milah*: to perfect their child through the *mitzvah*. However, why is the *mitzvah* placed in the middle of the discussion about a woman who gives birth and her ritual purity status?

The answer is based on the concept of ritual purity in the first place. What days a woman who gives birth is impure and what days she remains pure are beyond our human logic. They lack any comprehension. We just know that this is what Hashem told us. It turns out then that the *mitzvos* relating to ritual purity are a pure decree from Hashem. Why did He command them to us? We have to say that it's solely to purify and perfect our ways. What this means as these two *mitzvos*, *bris milah* and ritual purity, share something in common. They lack any comprehension other than to signify that the *mitzvos* were given to perfect ourselves. This is why the *mitzvah* of *bris milah* was sandwiched in the middle of a discussion about the ritual purity of a woman who gave birth.

Good Shabbos

⁹ [Genesis 17:1](#)