

# Parsha Ponders

Bris Milah | May 30, 2023 | 10 Sivan 5783

## Revealing the hidden potential<sup>1</sup>

ואברהם בן-תשעים ותשע שנה בהמלו בשר ערלתו

Avraham was 99 years old when he cut off his foreskin<sup>2</sup>

A common theme found in our Sages' writings<sup>3</sup> is that Avraham Avinu kept the entire Torah before it was given. This creates a question that many are bothered by, which is why didn't Avraham perform *bris milah* until Hashem told him to do so? Many answers are given<sup>4</sup>. One answer<sup>5</sup> is that it is forbidden to

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<sup>1</sup> Based on various sources that I found and collected

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 17:24

<sup>3</sup> Kiddushin 4:14; Yoma 28b; Bereishis Rabbah 64:47

<sup>4</sup> For example, Mizrachi to Genesis 17:25 says that he knew he would be commanded to perform *bris milah*, and one who is commanded and performs is greater than one who volunteers (Bava Kamma 38a). He was preceded by Rabbeinu Peretz, brought by Riva to Genesis 17:24, as well as Minchas Yehuda ad. loc. in the name of "The Rav" (one manuscript explicitly cites Rabbeinu Tam (of Orleans, see note 9), who the former had just cited, and three manuscripts explicitly cite Rabbeinu Peretz). The Yefeh Toar to Bereishis Rabbah 47:8 seems to be quoting the Riva. Yefeh Toar then brings an anonymous answer that other *mitzvos* can be performed more than once, unlike *milah*, so Avraham waited until he was commanded. **This seems to just be an extension of the first answer**. Indeed, that's how the Tzeidah LaDerech to Genesis 18:1 explains things (albeit to address a different issue). He cites it from Teshuvos Mishpetei Shmuel § 13, by Rav Shmuel Kalei, a contemporary of the Yefeh Toar. He in turn cites it from "Likkutim" on that verse. This Mishpetei Shmuel is also brought by the Chida in his Rosh Dovid parshas Lech Lecha and Kisei Dovid Derush § 4 L'Shabbos Kallah. This comment of the Tzeidah LaDerech is brought by Sifsei Chachamim ad. loc. Kesav Sofer to Genesis 21:4 says this is actually the intent of the Mizrachi, although the Yefeh Toar clearly disagrees. Bartenura to v. 25 and Maharsha to Yevamos 100b s.v. מלתא מעתה say Avraham only kept the Torah after he received his *bris milah*. They were preceded by the Riva, Paneach Raza to Genesis 17:25 in the name of Rav Yaakov, as well as the Minchas Yehuda, also brought by the Yefeh Toar

<sup>5</sup> Panim Yafos to Genesis 17:1 s.v. ומה שהקשו. He bases himself on Rashi to Genesis 9:5, quoting Bereishis Rabbah 34:13, understanding him to say that a non-Jew is forbidden from killing himself (Cf. Minchas Chinuch 34:8, who says that this prohibition doesn't apply to non-Jews). The Panim Yafos extends this prohibition to any form of self-mutilation or injury (see Bava Kamma 91b and Tosefta Bava Kamma Chapter 9 (end)). In his Makneh to Kiddushin 82a s.v. מצינו he cites this comment of his in Panim Yafos. Rabbi Eliezer MiMitz, in his Sefer Yereim Amud 7 § 402 (19), asks Tosafos question (see below), and writes "I didn't hear any answer". The Toafos Re'eim ad. loc. § 5 suggests that he held like the Panim Yafos, and was thus bothered by the question on Tosafos that is to follow. The Chida, a contemporary of the Panim Yafos, says the same idea in his Kisei Dovid loc. cit. The Kesav Sofer to Genesis 17:1 somewhat partially says the same answer as the Panim Yafos (who happens to be his father's teacher), although he doesn't cite him. The Kesav Sofer suggests that when Avraham kept the Torah before it was commanded, he didn't do it with full confidence. He could never be sure if he intuited Hashem's will correctly. Usually this wasn't a problem, for if he was wrong about not wearing *shaatnez* or not eating *treif*, no harm done. This was not so with *bris milah*, for if he was wrong and it wasn't a *mitzvah*, he would have committed a prohibition by injuring himself. He therefore waited until Hashem commanded him to be sure it was proper to do. In contrast, Rash from London, brought by Riva and Minchas Yehuda loc. cit., (the latter brought by Yefeh Toar loc. cit.), says that Avraham didn't voluntarily perform *milah* on himself because he didn't **want** to injure himself. It sounds like it was permissible, but for whatever reason Avraham didn't want to voluntarily do a painful *mitzvah*. Cf. Torah Sheleimah to Genesis Chapter 17 § 157, who understood the Rash to be saying it's prohibited to injure oneself (like the Panim Yafos). The Rash argues on the approach of Rabbeinu Peretz loc. cit., that Avraham wanted more reward, because if Avraham knew he wouldn't be commanded in *priyah*, why didn't he at least volunteer that, before the command to circumcise himself? I don't understand this question, as I don't know how it's physically possible to do *priyah* before *milah*. Unless he means he should have done both *milah* and *priyah* early, since he would never be commanded in *priyah*, but I don't understand that logic, as he loses out on being commanded in *milah*. Regarding this question of the Rash on Rabbeinu Peretz, Riva and Minchas Yehuda loc. cit.

injure oneself, so without an explicit command from G-d, it would have been forbidden to voluntarily circumcise himself. Once Hashem told him to do so, Avraham didn't delay.

The problem with this approach is it seems to clash with another teaching. There are two stages of *bris milah*, one known as *milah*, where the foreskin is cut off, and the second is *priyah*, where the thin membrane surrounding the *eiver* is pulled down. Today the *halacha* is that without both stages, the *bris milah* is incomplete and thus invalid. Our Sages say<sup>6</sup> that Avraham was an exception to this, and was only given the *mitzvah* of *milah*<sup>7</sup>. It was only when the Torah was given that the *mitzvah* of *priyah* was added<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, Avraham voluntarily performed *priyah*<sup>9</sup>. If it's true that Avraham delayed

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conclude that there's no question of why Avraham didn't do *priyah* early, since, as Rashi and Bereishis Rabbah explain (see below), he didn't need *priyah*.

<sup>6</sup> Yevamos 71b; Zohar III parshas Shelach p. 163b

<sup>7</sup> The *gemarra* says this as a fact, and provides a proof from Joshua 5:2, which says the Jews performed circumcision again, a second time. The *gemarra* retorts that perhaps this is referring to those who weren't able to perform the *mitzvah* while wandering for forty years in the wilderness. To this, the *gemarra* responds that the verse stresses that they circumcised *again* to teach that they were *already* circumcised, but were now performing the *mitzvah* of *priyah*. The *gemarra* then asks why the verse adds that it was the *second* time, and answers it's to teach us that all the necessary pieces of the foreskin have to be removed. This is how Rashi ad. loc. has the *gemarra*, and how Tosafos ad. loc. s.v. בקונטרס likes to read it. However, Rashi brings a second version of the *gemarra*, and Tosafos says it's the version that Rabbeinu Chananel had, which reads very differently. This version, instead of asking two separate questions of what *again* and *a second time* are coming to teach, asks it as one question: what are these two extra words coming to teach? The *gemarra* responds that it's coming to teach that they were now introduced with the *mitzvah* of *priyah*. However, in this version, the *gemarra* deflects this proof and suggests that perhaps the extraneous words are coming to teach us that the necessary pieces of the foreskin have to be removed. According to this version of the *gemarra*, there's actually *no* source for the statement that Avraham wasn't given the *mitzvah* of *priyah*. Tosafos notes this, somewhat impartially. However, Tosafos Yeshanim ad. loc. don't like this conclusion, as the *gemarra* would then be falling off this statement without any resolution, and thus prefer Rashi's initial reading of the *gemarra*. Halachos Gedolos Hilchos Milah and Sheiltos § 93 bring Rashi's initial reading. The alternative version of the *gemarra* is how the Radak to Joshua 5:2 explains the verse there. It is also brought by the Meiri ad. loc., and he seems to prefer it to the version we have, although he explains the verse in a different way "*lefi peshuto shel mikrah*". Ritva ad. loc. s.v. מאי כ"א brings both versions. See also Nimukei HaRid, brought in note 9. See as well Tosafos Yom Tov to Shabbos 19:6. Finally, see Kesav Sofer to Genesis 21:4 for a fascinating explanation for why Hashem commanded Avraham in *milah* but not in *priyah*

<sup>8</sup> Tosafos ad. loc. s.v. לא ניתנה and Moshav Zekeinim ad. loc. explain that it's a *Halacha L'Moshe MiSinai*, and when the *gemarra* learns it out from a verse in Joshua, it's an *asmachta*. The Meiri ad. loc. says similarly, that the command was given to Moshe but only revealed in the days of Yehoshua. Although, he calls it a stretch. Tosafos Maharam MiRottenburg and Tosafos Rabbeinu Peretz ad. loc. s.v. לא ניתנה (it's the same text) bring those that say Moshe was commanded in *priyah*, but only told Yehoshua at the end of their forty-year journey. However, their problem with that is how could the Jews eat meat during that time if they had the status of ערלים. Ramban ad. loc. s.v. לא ניתנה says that the *gemarra* means that Moshe was commanded in *priyah*. Perhaps he means like the Rashba ad. loc. s.v. לא נתנה, which is that Moshe was commanded to start the *mitzvah* of *priyah* from Yehoshua onward. Or perhaps like Ritva ad. loc. s.v. שנאמר בעת, who says that Moshe was commanded to do *priyah* once they enter the land. Halachos Gedolos loc. cit. says that Moshe was commanded in *priyah* in Egypt, which is interesting. Perhaps his intent is to Yerushalmi Shabbos 19:2, Yerushalmi Yevamos 8:1, Yerushalmi Nedarim 3:9, and Devarim Rabbah 10:1, which learns from Exodus 4:26 that Moshe was expected to perform *priyah* before he went to redeem the Jews

<sup>9</sup> Tosafos loc. cit., based on the above-mentioned idea that Avraham kept the entire Torah before it was given. Rashi to Genesis 17:25 brings an idea from Bereishis Rabbah 47:8 that Avraham's *milah* was easier to do than Yishmael's, since the former had been married for a long time, unlike Yishmael, who needed his foreskin cut and to

performing *bris milah* because it was forbidden for him to perform voluntary surgery on himself, then how could he voluntarily perform the *mitzvah* of *priyah*<sup>10</sup>? He was only given a permit for the first stage of *milah*, but not *priyah*. This is a problem that some try to address.

Rav Chaim Kanievsky was asked this question, and he proposed two answers<sup>11</sup>. One, is that *priyah* isn't considered injuring. Rather, it's considered improving the body. The second answer is that *priyah* isn't considered injuring, rather it's simply part of the process of injuring. Both of these answers require clarification. On another occasion<sup>12</sup> he explained the second answer to mean that blood that comes out

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perform *priyah*. The Mizrachi *ad. loc.* understands that Rashi and Bereishis Rabbah mean to say Avraham physically didn't need to do *priyah*, as once he cut the foreskin, the *priyah* happened on its own. However, we see that Avraham performed *priyah* on Yishmael. The Mizrachi is bothered by Yevamos *loc. cit.*, that Avraham wasn't commanded in *priyah*, and answers like Tosafos, that Avraham fulfilled the entire Torah, and thus volunteered to do *priyah* on Yishmael. His second answer is that this comment of Rashi and Bereishis Rabbah might be going with the opinion expressed in Bereishis Rabbah 46:12 (and Yerushalmi Shabbos 19:2), which disagrees with the sources in note 6. Avraham was in fact obligated in *priyah*. Radak *ad. loc.* reads Bereishis Rabbah that Rashi brought like the Mizrachi and explains like his second answer. In one of his answers to this contradiction on the *Midrash*, the Ritva *ad. loc. s.v. יצחק says that Rav Yitzchak, who brought the teaching that Avraham wasn't commanded in *priyah*, must have learned a different teaching for Rashi's verse. See Torah Sheleimah *ad. loc.* § 159, 160 who brings alternative teachings from Chazal for this verse. See also Tosafos HaShalem *ad. loc.* § 3. The Ritva's second answer is like Tosafos. Riva and Minchas Yehuda *loc. cit.* also understood Rashi like the Mizrachi, and bring from Rabbeinu Tam of Orleans the same answer as Tosafos. The same is in the Paneach Raza, Rav Chaim Paltiel, Moshav Zekeinim, and Chizkuni *ad. loc.*, as well as the Yefeh Toar *loc. cit.* Ramban and Rashba *loc. cit.* as well understood Rashi this way, and answer like Tosafos. As previously mentioned, Sefer Yereim *loc. cit.* brings the *gemarra* from Halachos Gedolos *loc. cit.*, and asks on it from Rashi as above, and says he hasn't heard an answer. Considering all of these *Ba'alei Tosafos* address this issue, he presumably means he hasn't heard a reasonable answer (see note 5 for Toafos Re'eim's explanation as to why). Interestingly, Nimukei HaRid *ad. loc.*, brought by Penei Dovid *ad. loc.*, asks the Mizrachi's question and answers by bringing the second version of the *gemarra* in Yevamos (brought in note 7), whose conclusion is that Avraham did in fact receive the *mitzvah* of *priyah*. In a different vein, the Meiri *ad. loc.* explains that when the *gemarra* says that Avraham wasn't given the *mitzvah* of *priyah*, it means that he didn't need *priyah*, as it says in Bereishis Rabbah, but then he says what the *Gedolei HaRabbanim*, i.e. the Mizrachi *et al.* say. See also Tosafos Maharam MiRottenburg and Tosafos Rabbeinu Peretz *loc. cit.*, who bring from Rav Shlomo of Troyes (הקדוש מרואם, although the latter brings from הקדוש מדורי"ש), that Avraham was commanded in *priyah*, and when the *gemarra* says he wasn't, it means he wasn't commanded to perform it on his children, nor their descendants on themselves. This could be the intent of the sources that say Avraham was commanded in *priyah*, but it wouldn't resolve the issue with why he did *priyah* on Yishmael. Cf. Gur Aryeh to v. 25, who, quite interestingly, disagrees with how all of these *Rishonim* read Rashi and Bereishis Rabbah*

<sup>10</sup> As mentioned previously, the Toafos Re'eim *loc. cit.* understood that the Sefer Yereim sees Avraham's delaying his *bris milah* as proof that he was actually commanded in *priyah*, as he would have been forbidden to volunteer for it. He thus rejects Tosafos *loc. cit.*'s resolution that Avraham volunteered in *priyah*, and has no resolution to Yevamos *loc. cit.* which says that Avraham was not commanded in *priyah*

<sup>11</sup> Da'as Noteh Lech Lecha § 267

<sup>12</sup> Shomer Emes to Genesis 17:9 § 2. See there, where the author suggests his own answer according to Mishneh Torah Hilchos Chovel U'Mazik 5:1 that one may injure themselves when there's a need, and suggests that doing it for the sake of a *mitzvah* is a need. One could perhaps argue that if he's not commanded to do *priyah*, it's not considered a need. Also this revives the question the Panim Yafos was coming to answer, which is why didn't Avraham volunteer *milah*? See Panim Yafos HaShalem VeHaMevuar to Genesis 17:24 fn. 255 who says something similar to the Shomer Emes, and clarifies that a large injury like *milah* wouldn't be allowed, but a small injury like *priyah* is fine due to the *mitzvah* need

during *priyah* isn't from the *priyah*. Rather, it's blood that came out during *milah*, but is only revealed during *priyah*. Since no new blood is emerging, there's no issue<sup>13</sup>.

With all this discussion about *priyah*, one wonders if there are any lessons behind the ritual. If we delve deeply, we can find a meaningful lesson within the symbolism behind *priyah*<sup>14</sup>. When we give our kids a *bris milah*, we are entering them into a covenant with the Almighty. One might think that us lowly humans have no chance of forging such a bond, and would have to change ourselves immensely to make that happen. Happens to be, Hashem teaches us that that is not the case. He does not want us to deny who we are. Instead, He simply wants us to remove any barriers to forge such a relationship. This is symbolized by *milah*. Furthermore, he wants us to reveal the potential hidden within us, as symbolized by *priyah*. Hashem wants us to take what we already have and release it into fruition.

May we all merit to bring out our inner potential.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Radal to Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 29 § 48, who says that perhaps the reason why the Jews didn't perform *priyah* in the desert was because it expels more blood than *milah*. Toafos Re'eim *loc. cit.* says the same as the Radal, and perhaps he's even quoting him, since he cited this Radal a few lines earlier. Although, one could possibly squeeze Rav Chaim's proposal into this

<sup>14</sup> Heard from Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz