

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XL: Balak (Num. 22:2–25:9)

Essay 6. Circumcision sets Israel as a nation apart

"כִּי-מֵרָאשׁ צָרִים אֶרְאֶנּוּ" וְכִי "וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשְׁבּוּ". יֵשׁ לְדַקְדֵּק מֵהוּ "מֵרָאשׁ צָרִים", וּמֵהוּ "אֶרְאֶנּוּ" וְ"אֲשׁוּרְנּוּ", וּמֵהוּ "לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכֵּן וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשְׁבּוּ" שֶׁנֶּרְאָה כְּפֶל.

“As I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights, there is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations.”¹ We need to check what is the significance of “from the mountain tops,” and what is the significance of “As I see them” and “gaze on them”? What is the significance of “that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations,” which appears redundant.

וְכַתּוּב הַפְּלִי יָקָר עַל פְּסוּק "וַיִּמַּל אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל", "וַיֵּשׁוּב מִלְּאֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל", וְזֶה לְשׁוֹנוֹ בְּקִיצוֹר, סוּד הַמִּילָה לְהִיּוֹתָהּ פְּרוּעָה לְגַמְרֵי שֶׁהוּא רָמַז לְגִילּוּי אִוְרוֹ יִתְבַּרְךָ אֵל עִמּוֹ וְאֵל חֲסִידָיו. וְלֹא יִתְכַּן בִּימֵי הָאֲבוֹת כִּי עֲדִינִין כַּח הַקְּלִיפָה שֶׁל הַפְּרִיעָה מְכֻסָּה אִוֵּר הַמִּילָה, שֶׁכֵּן נִתְחַיֵּיב בְּעוֹן אָדָם הָרֵאשׁוֹן לְהַשְׁלִיט הַרַע עַל הַטוֹב, וְכִשְׁפָּא אֲבָרְהָם הִתְחַיֵּל לְתַקֵּן מֵה שֶׁקִּלְקַל אָדָם הָרֵאשׁוֹן כְּנֹדָע. וְכֵן יִצְחָק וְכֵן יַעֲקֹב, וְאַחֲרָיִם כִּד נִכְנְסוּ בְּנֵיהֶם בְּכֹוֹר הַבְּרִיָּה בְּמִצְרַיִם, וְעוֹד הִלְכוּ בְּמִדְבָּר "נִחַשׁ שָׂרָף וְעַקְרָב" כְּדִי לְהַחֲלִישׁ כֹּחֵם וְלְתַקֵּן הַכֹּחַ וְאַחֲרָיִם גָּמַר הַתִּיקוֹן וְנִכְנְסוּ לְאֶרֶץ הַקְּדוּשָׁה.

The *Kli Yakar* wrote on the verse, “So Joshua had flint knives made, and he circumcised the Israelites at the Hill of Foreskins,”² and on the previous verse, “At that time G-d said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and proceed with a second circumcision of the Israelites,’ ”³ and this is his language in short:

The esoteric secret of circumcision is for [the corona] to be completely uncovered.⁴ This is a hint of the revelation to His people and to His pious ones of His holy light, may He be blessed. This was not possible in the days of the forefathers, because the power of the *klipah* of the mucosal membrane still covered the light of the circumcision. For the sin of the first man, Adam obliged the evil forces to rule over the good forces, but when Abraham came, he began to remedy what the first Adam spoiled, as is known to Kabbalists.⁵ So did Isaac

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¹ Num. 23:9.

² Joshua 5:3.

³ Joshua 5:2.

⁴ Removing the foreskin, by *milah*, and peeling back the mucosal membrane, by *periyah*.

⁵ Gen. Rabbah 14:6.

and so did Jacob, and then their sons entered the iron blast furnace in Egypt,⁶ and they also walked in the wilderness of a fiery serpent, and snakes, and scorpions⁷ to [further] weaken the power [of the evil forces] and to remedy everything. After the remedy was finished, they entered the Holy Land.

- Kli Yakar⁸

ואמרינו בפרק ח' דיבמות לא ניתנה פריעת מילה לאברהם אבינו, והטעם שלפי שצדיין לא גמר לתקן פגם אדם הראשון לא היה בידו לגרש הקליפה מפל וכל ולכן לא נתגלה אור יו"ד של הפריעה, אבל כשנכנסו לארץ וכבר נגמר התיקון ולא היה עוד נחש שרף ועקרב, אז הוא "עת לכל-חפץ" וניתנה להם מצות הפריעה, שהקדושה שרתה בארץ ולא היה עוד פחד מהקליפה כי גרש גרשו אותה ועיי"ש.

In the 8th chapter of tractate Yevamot, “The [mitzvah of] *periyah* [uncovering the corona during] circumcision was not given to our Patriarch Abraham.”⁹ I.e., they only had the mitzvah of *milah*, removing the foreskin, but not the mitzvah of *periyah*, peeling back the mucosal membrane. The reason is that since [Abraham] had not yet finished correcting the defect of the first man, Adam, he did not have it in his power to expel the *klipah* completely. Therefore, the light of the *yod* of the word *periyah* was not revealed. This refers to the *yod* of the Tetragrammaton, which is associated with circumcision.¹⁰ However, when [the Israelites] entered the Land and the repair was already completed and there were no longer fiery serpents, and snakes, and scorpions, then it was “time for every desire.”¹¹ Then they were given the commandment of *periyah*, as the holiness rested upon the Land and there was no longer fear from the *klipah*, for it had been driven away. At that point, Joshua conducted a second circumcision, removing additional foreskin and ensuring that the mucosal membrane was peeled back.

ויוכן הטעם שהיהושה עשה אותן גבועה פדכתית "אל-גבעת הערלות", ולפי מאי דקיימא לן פינוס לרשעים, רע לעולם, לא היה לו לעשות כן. אבל לפי שכבר הוחלש ונסתלק פח הקליפה לא היה לו פחד כלל, ומשום הכי להראות זה עשה אותם גבועה.

The reason is now understood why Joshua made them a hill, as it is written, “at the Hill of Foreskins.” According to what we hold, “The assembly of the wicked [in one place] is detrimental to them and detrimental to the world,”¹² it seemingly wasn’t proper for him to do this, to gather the foreskins, which are associated with the evil inclination.¹³ But because the *klipah* was already weakened and the power removed from it, he no longer had any fear at all, and because of this, to show this, he made a hill for them.

⁶ Deut. 4:20.

⁷ Deut. 8:15.

⁸ Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (“Kli Yakar”) (1550–1619). The translator has not located the source.

⁹ Yevamot 71b.

¹⁰ Tikkunei Zohar, Hakdamah 11a.

¹¹ Eccl. 3:1.

¹² Mishnah Sanhedrin 8:5; Sanhedrin 71b.

¹³ Sukkah 52a: “The evil inclination has seven names. . . . Moses called it uncircumcised.”

והכתוב "כִּי־מֵרֵאשׁ צָרִים" מדבר על המילה, כמו שפירשו במדרש על פסוק הסמוך לו "מִי מָנָה עֵפֶר יַעֲקֹב" וכו' וכן מצינו בקלות על פסוק "כִּי־מֵרֵאשׁ צָרִים" אני צופה מה עתידו לעשות בצורים. "עשה להם חרבות צרים", "כִּי־מֵרֵאשׁ צָרִים אֲרָאנִי" פלומר אני רואה שהמילה ניתנה לראש צורים שהיא אברהם ואחר כך הפריעה ניתנה בזמן שעשו הערות גבעה בימי יהושע שאז נגמר התיקון ולא היה להם עוד פחד.

The Scripture, "As I see them from the mountain tops" speaks about *milah*, removing the foreskin, as [the rabbis] explained in the Midrash Rabbah 20:14 on the adjacent verse, "Who can count the dust of Jacob?"¹⁴ Similarly, we find in the Yalkut Shimoni, remez 768 on the verse "As I see them from the mountain tops," that it means "I, [Bilam], am watching what will happen in the future with rocks," i.e., that Joshua will be commanded to "make flint knives." "As I see them from the mountain tops," as if to say, "I see that the *milah* is given to the mountain tops," which is referring to Abraham, "and afterward the *periyah* is given in the time that they made the Hill of Foreskins," in the days of Joshua. For then the correction is completed and there was no longer any fear of [the evil forces].

וזהו "אשורנו", לשון הבטה ועיון בשכל, כמו שפירש הרד"ק בשורש שור. ומשום הכי אני אומר "הוֹעֵם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁפֹּן", שבשביל המילה נקראים ישראל "בְּדָד" בדאמרין בחלק "אנו דמהלינו לא מצינו מיהוי פוּתִיכּוֹ". ועוד עתה שניתנה להם הפריעה ונחלשה הטומאה מכל וכל, אף אם לא ימולו את עצמם לא יהיו נקראים ערלים כמו הגוים, רק מולים כמו ישראל, בדתנו בנדרים קונם שאיני נהנה למולים, אסור בערלי ישראל ומותר במולי אומות, וזהו "ובגוים לא יתחשב".

This is the meaning of "gaze at them," the language of looking and understanding intellectually, as the Radak explained in discussing the root of the word "*shur*."¹⁵ Because of this, I say, "There is a people that dwells apart," that because of the circumcision, Israel is called "alone." This is as it is said in *Chelek* [sic], "[But] we, who are circumcised, cannot become [uncircumcised] as you [idolators are]."¹⁶ Further, now that *periyah* is given to them and the spiritual impurity is very weakened, then even if they don't circumcise themselves,¹⁷ they wouldn't be called "uncircumcised" like the gentiles, only "circumcised" like Israel, because of their achievements against the evil forces. As it is taught in tractate Nedarim:

[If one vows,] **"Benefiting from those who are circumcised [is forbidden] for me, he is prohibited [from deriving benefit even] from uncircumcised Jews [because they are still called "circumcised" by virtue of being part of the Jewish people], but he is permitted [to derive benefit] from the circumcised of the nations of the world [because even if they are actually circumcised, they are considered "uncircumcised" because of their idolatrous beliefs].**

- Nedarim 31b

This is the meaning of "[they are] not reckoned among the nations."

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¹⁴ Num. 23:10.

¹⁵ David Kimchi ("RaDaK") (1160–1235), *Sefer haShorashim*.

¹⁶ Sanhedrin 39a. The text erroneously references "*Chelek*," the 10th chapter of Mishnah Sanhedrin.

¹⁷ For example, if it would be life-threatening to do so.