

What is Circumcision?

by Rabbi Moshe Schapiro

How a simple mitzvah makes a worldwide, eternal impact on the entire Jewish people.

Brit Milah, or circumcision, is performed on a Jewish male eight days after he is born.

The procedure is performed by a *mohel* -- a person who has mastered the set of Jewish laws regarding circumcision and received extensive practical training.

At a *Brit Milah*, the *mohel* removes the baby's foreskin and draws blood from the reproductive organ, after which the baby is given a Jewish name.

WHY A BRIT MILAH?

Brit Milah literally means "covenant of circumcision." Abraham, Judaism's founding father, was the first person in history to have a *Brit Milah*. In fact, he circumcised himself.

Abraham vowed that he would teach his descendents to serve God with perfect devotion. In return, God promised to guarantee the survival of Abraham's progeny -- the family of Hebrews that became the nation of Israel that have since been known as the Jews.

As long as there would be human beings in the world, God assured Abraham, there would always be Jews. This covenant or pact between God and Abraham was sealed through the act of circumcision.

Today, by performing the act of circumcision, Jews perpetuate the covenant and make their children a part of that eternal promise.

A DEEPER MEANING

The fact that the *Brit Milah* is performed on the eighth day after a boy is born hints to this idea of eternal Jewish continuity.

In the Torah, all references to the numbers have great significance. For example, the number six represents the physical world which has four directions (north, south, east and west) plus up and down. The six days of creation, the six days of the work-week, also allude to the physical world.

Seven adds a spiritual element to the physical. The seventh day, Shabbat, adds spirituality to our lives though it is still within the realm of the physical world. Eight, on the other hand, transcends the physical altogether. For example, the eight-day miracle of Chanukah is beyond nature, surpassing the physical constraints of natural laws and standards. Eight represents a higher dimension of reality.

God's guarantee that Abraham's children would survive forever as a nation defies the laws of nature. History has proven time and again that even the most powerful nations on earth are bound eventually to vanish into extinction -- e.g., the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. And yet the Jews, a numerically insignificant people, are still here, alive and well.

The *Brit Milah*, performed on the eighth day, reminds us that Jewish survival is not a natural phenomenon, but a supernatural one. Jewish survival defies the laws of nature. This explains why the mark of circumcision is made on the reproductive organ -- it symbolizes the idea that the Jewish People's seed will never be

destroyed.

In addition, *Brit Milah* is done specifically on the site that is identified with our greatest physical desires, thus empowering us to rise above the demands of our bodies.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE RITUAL CIRCUMCISION

Translating *Brit Milah* as simply "circumcision" rather than "covenant circumcision," erroneously implies that the removal of the foreskin is the most important element of the mitzvah.

In truth, however, the circumcision must be coupled with the intention to forge a blood pact between God and the Jewish people.

For this reason a person who underwent a medical circumcision, without intent to fulfill this commandment, should undergo a subsequent procedure performed with specific intent to fulfill this mitzvah. This subsequent procedure is relatively painless, involving only the drawing of blood from the reproductive organ, but done in the name of *Brit Milah*.

PERSONAL COMMITMENT

The secret to Jewish continuity lies in the *Brit Milah*, which strengthens one's *personal* commitment to God. Once this is achieved, the communal commitment will emerge on its own.

In his covenant of circumcision, Abraham vowed to teach his descendants to serve God with perfect devotion. This is the essence of *Brit Milah* -- it represents the individual's *personal* commitment to God. One's communal identification with Judaism is indeed a positive thing. But the *mitzvah* of *Brit Milah* teaches us that unless there is also a *personal* commitment, it will not endure.

May we all merit to bring our children into the Covenant of Abraham and see their Jewish identity flourish and grow.