חסידות

From the Chassidic Courts

CHABAD · TORAH OHR, LECH LECHA

Why Avraham waited to circumcise himself

Torah Ohr

Two distinct aspects of milah exist: one from below to above—circumcising "the foreskin of the heart" through teshuvah and Torah observance—and a greater one from above to below, "Hashem will circumcise your heart," a future revelation surpassing even the Name Havayah and Torah itself, drawn through the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. Avraham, having already fulfilled the entire Torah (the lower level), delayed his own circumcision because he sought this higher, divinely-initiated milah, and it was only when this essential, future-level revelation was granted him that "Avraham was circumcised." AI SUMMARY

In the selfsame day Avraham was circumcised, etc. (Bereishis 17:26) To understand the question noted in the sefarim (books): why did Avraham not circumcise himself earlier, seeing that he kept the entire Torah even before it was given — even eruvei tavshilin (the rabbinic provision permitting cooking on Yom Tov for Shabbos)? To understand this, we must first explain the matter of milah (circumcision). For behold, it is written, "Lo bashamayim hi — It is not in heaven, [that one should] say, Who shall go up for us to heaven" (Devarim 30:12) — the roshei teivot (initial letters) of this phrase spell milah, and the sofei teivot (final letters) spell the Havayah (the four-letter Name of Hashem).

And the matter is as follows: At first it is written, "U'maltem et orlat levavchem" ("And you shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart") [Devarim 10:16], and it is [also] written, "U'mal Hashem Elokecha et levavcha" ("And Hashem your G-d will circumcise your heart") [Devarim 30:6]. The explanation is that there are two aspects of milah (circumcision): the one is from below to above, that we must circumcise the foreskin of the heart, and this is the matter of teshuvah (repentance), as it is written, "V'shavta ad Hashem Elokecha" ("And you shall return unto Hashem your G-d") through the fulfillment of Torah and mitzvot, and our Sages of blessed memory said: "If Yisrael do teshuvah, they are redeemed, and if not, they are not redeemed."

And after the ingathering of the exiles it is written, "V'havi'acha el ha'aretz v'heitivcha..." ("And He will bring you into the land and do good to you...") [Devarim 30:5]. This is the milah that is from above to below — "u'mal Hashem et levavcha." (And this is "v'heitivcha" - more than your fathers - the aspect of "mah rav tuvcha asher tzafanta" ["How great is Your goodness which You have hidden..."], for regarding Moshe, who was born circumcised, it is written, "vatere oto ki tov hu" ["and she saw that he was good"].) That is to say, the first aspect of milah, from below to above, is itaruta dilitata (arousal from below), while the itaruta dile'eila (arousal from above) is the revelation of the aspect "u'mal Hashem et levavcha."

Now, concerning this second milah, which will be after the ingathering of the exiles and after the fulfillment of the entire Torah, it is written, "Mi ya'aleh lanu hashamaymah" ("Who will go up for us to the heavens") [Devarim 30:12] — the initial letters (rashei teivot) spell milah — for it is above the aspect of the Torah. For regarding the Torah it is said, "Lo bashamayim hi" ("It is not in the heavens") [Devarim 30:12], for it is lowered down specifically, as

mentioned in the Gemara, where Rabbi Yehoshua said: "We do not heed a bat kol (heavenly voice), for the Torah is not in heaven" — rather it is below it, and it is called "Torat Hashem" (the Torah of Hashem), for the Name Havayah consists of yud (contraction), hei (expansion), vav (drawing forth)... through which it is drawn down below. But the milah mentioned above is higher than the Name Havayah, to the extent that it is [alluded to] in the initial letters, while the Name Havayah is [alluded to] in the final letters (sof teivot). Therefore it is of the aspect and level of "hashamaymah" (the heavens), above the aspect of the Torah which was lowered beneath the aspect of these heavens.

And concerning this our Sages of blessed memory said: "Great is milah, for thirteen covenants were cut over it." The explanation is: "Great is milah" refers to the aspect of the great milah which is from above to below (see Mikdash Melech on the Zohar, vol. 3, 233b, and Likkutei Torah, Parashat Kedoshim, in Ta'amei HaMitzvot, regarding the matter of "gedolah milah") — that "Hashem will circumcise your heart." And therefore it was cut with thirteen covenants, meaning — as is known — that the matter of cutting a covenant is above intellect and understanding, after the manner of two friends who make a covenant to love one another, namely, that it should be bound that he will love him even if afterward this love toward him would not be drawn from intellect and understanding; nevertheless, he binds himself to love in a mode that is above intellect and understanding. So too, in order for there to be revelation and drawing-forth of the aspect of the great milah mentioned above (which is the aspect of "mah rav tuvcha" - "how great is Your goodness"), it comes through the Yud Gimmel Middot HaRachamim (Thirteen Attributes of Mercy), which are above chochmah (wisdom) and intellect, and therefore it is above the aspect of the Name Havayah and above the aspect of Torah (just as the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy are an aspect above the Torah, and therefore there is forgiveness of sin).

And concerning this it is said, "Ad ya'avor amcha Hashem" ("Until Your people pass over, Hashem") — meaning, until it passes into an aspect above the Name Havayah (and also regarding the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy it is written, "Vaya'avor..." - "And He passed...").

Now by this one can understand the matter of Avraham, who fulfilled the entire Torah before it was given, yet did not fulfill the mitzvah of milah — because he wished to attain that great milah which is from above to below. Therefore he fulfilled the entire Torah, which is below that milah, and afterward he merited that great milah from above.

This is what is meant by "Avraham was circumcised" — it is not written "and he circumcised himself," as was written earlier regarding the circumcision of Yishmael and those bought with his money, where it is written "and he circumcised, etc." This is because that is the circumcision which is from below, as it is written, "and you shall circumcise the orlah (foreskin) of your hearts." But Avraham merited the revelation of the aspect of "Hashem will circumcise your heart" — therefore it says "Avraham was circumcised, etc."

And this is the meaning of "in the very essence (be'etzem) of this day he was circumcised" — meaning, in the essentiality of this day. And "this day" is the day that is entirely long, that is entirely good, etc. And the essentiality of this day is that great revelation that will be in the future to come, the revelation of the aspect of "the abundance of Your goodness," and this is "that is entirely good." And when the aspect of the essence of this day was revealed to him, then "Avraham was circumcised, etc."

Translation: translated by AI (anthropic/claude-sonnet-5)