

Getting “All Cut Up” Over Food

PARSHA INSIGHTS - MIKAITZ (5758)

A “FORCED CONVERSION” FOR THE EGYPTIANS?

“Come now, and let us go up against them, and destroy the covenant their G-d has made with them: Their Shabbos [the Sabbath], *Rosh Chodesh* [new moon/start of the new Hebrew month], and *bris milah* [covenant of circumcision]...” (*Megillas Antiochus* 11). Thus declared the wicked Greek king, Antiochus, to his officers in the twenty third year of his reign, which was the 213th year after the second *Bais Hamikdosh* [Temple] had been erected (ibid 6). It was his intention to destroy the *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel] spiritually. The rest is glorious history which we are reliving (NOT merely “commemorating”) now, as we celebrate *Chanuka*.

It seems an appropriate time to delve into the topic of *bris milah*. In fact, *Parshas* [the Torah portion of] *Mikaitz* has much to do with *milah* [circumcision]. Just as Antiochus, much later on, wished to assimilate the Jews by prohibiting them from performing this *mitzvah* [commandment], Yosef *Hatzadik* [Joseph the righteous man] wished to prevent assimilation by enforcing its observance. We will now discover how this is so.

After the seven years of plenty, the seven years of devastating famine suddenly began (our *parsha* [Torah portion], 41:53 & 54). “All of Egypt felt the famine, and the people cried out to Paroh for food. Paroh told all Egypt, ‘Go to Yosef; do whatever he tells you’” (41:55). What was it that Yosef was telling them? The *Midrash Rabba* in 90:6 explains in the name of R. Abba Bar Kahana that Yosef was forcing the Egyptians to circumcise themselves. Paroh was informing them that in order to earn food, they must abide by whatever demands Yosef would make, including the “outrageous” idea of *bris milah*. Let us see this in more detail inside the *Midrash Tanchuma* 7 on our *parsha*, where the account is also found.

The *Tanchuma* states that once the famine became overwhelming, the Egyptians gathered and approached the viceroy of the land, Yosef, asking for sustenance. Yosef’s response was sharp: “My G-d does not feed uncircumcised people! Go circumcise yourselves, and I will give you food.” At that point, the Egyptians complained to Paroh about Yosef’s unreasonable policy. The purpose of this discussion is to solve an obvious mystery. Why did Yosef demand that the Egyptians get *bris milah*? Was this some sort of forced conversion?

To quote the words of the *Maharal* on our *pasuk* [verse] (41:55), “Why did he tell them to get *bris milah*? Isn’t it true that we do not force a gentile to convert?” Commentaries on the *Gur Aryeh* (*Maharal*) explain that the *Maharal* first assumed that the *bris milah* Yosef was requiring was for **conversion**. That is why he asks his question. This will NOT be the conclusion, however.

The *Gur Aryeh* answers that Yosef had been making some important observations regarding the Egyptians; these led him to his decision of compulsory circumcision.

Our *Midrash Tanchuma* in 7 states that Paroh scolded his subjects for their apparent negligence in saving food for the years of famine. When they came to Paroh begging for food, he wondered why they had not stocked supplies properly. Their response was that they had done this, but it all got spoiled somehow. Even the bread they had been eating on the last day of the seven years of plenty suddenly became moldy. There was not even a morsel left from yesterday! It was then that Paroh advised his people to do WHATEVER Yosef would decree - if he had made some type of pronouncement which caused their food to suddenly rot, he might also decree that they all die! Thus, Paroh commanded them to be obedient to Yosef. The bottom line is, though, that the *Midrash* is teaching that all their food supplies were spoiled. This was the determining factor in Yosef’s policy of requiring *bris milah*. This will now be explained using the *Maharal*’s words with some comments from Rav Yehoshua Dovid Hartman for clarification.

Since only THEIR stored food, but not Yosef’s, had rotted, Yosef figured out that **this happened to them because they were uncircumcised**. There was no *bris* [“pact” or covenant] between them and Hashem, so why should Hashem do them the enormous favor of preserving their food? It is not that they were violating some *halacha* [law] just by being uncircumcised, since non-Jews do not actually need a *bris milah* unless they wish to convert. It was simply unheard of that such a huge *chesed* [kindness] should be done for a bunch of uncircumcised people (who were also terribly immoral).

The *Maharal* adds that all components of a human being are meant to last and survive except for one. Yes, the *orlah* [foreskin], is NOT meant to be maintained. The proof to this is that the Torah required Jews to remove it. Therefore, one possessing the *orlah* is himself attached to “something which has no permanence; therefore his produce would rot.” True, gentiles do not HAVE TO get a *bris milah*, but in this case, Hashem revealed His will. The Egyptians **lost** their food because they **kept** their foreskin. As Rav Yehoshua Dovid Hartman remarks, this is like the major rule that “extra” causes “deficiency” many times in the eyes of *halacha* (*Chulin* 58B). Extraneous matter results in loss of substance that is really needed. Consequently, it is no longer perplexing that Yosef forced them to do *bris milah*. This was NOT the beginning of some conversion process; it was an independent act to fulfill Hashem’s will.

Another reason to make circumcision obligatory for the Egyptians is found in the *Aitz Yosef* in the name of the *Ya’aros Devash* right on the *Midrash Tanchuma* we have been studying. This ties in with the theme of *Chanuka* and assimilation with which we began. Yosef foresaw that *Bnai Yisroel* were destined to experience the Egyptian exile and would tend to mix with the Egyptian people. If so, *chas v’shalom* [heaven forbid], they might eventually neglect the *mitzvah* of *bris milah*, since the inhabitants of the land do not perform this. If such a tragedy would develop, the fate of *Bnai Yisroel* would be sealed for doom, Heaven forbid. The whole identity and badge of a Jew is supposed to be *bris milah*. How could one be sure we would last as a nation? As a result, Yosef contrived a plan. The Egyptians would have *bris milah*, and so their Jewish neighbors would not be ashamed to do the same. Thus, Yosef imposed the process on the Egyptian population NOW in anticipation of the *Golus Mitzraim* [Egyptian exile]. The “excuse” he used? “My G-d is only willing to feed those who are circumcised”, as mentioned above.

☞ I am sure other reasons exist for Yosef’s edict that the non-Jews of Egypt perform *bris milah*. In fact, a magnificent *pshat* [explanation] is found in the *Oznaim L’Torah* on *Mikaitz* 41:33. Check it out if you would like; you will definitely find it satisfying.

The *Yevanim* [Greeks] attempted to destroy our morale and religious observance. *Boruch* Hashem [may G-d be blessed!] for the spectacular victory over them. *Bris milah* was on their agenda as something which certainly needed to be abolished, *chas v’shalom*. Just as in *Mitzraim*, where Yosef made sure that even the EGYPTIANS performed *bris milah*, we Jews have always adhered meticulously to this *mitzvah*, through every exile. *Golus Mitzraim* preceded all other *goluyos* [exiles]; Yosef *Hatzadik* set the tone for Jewish survival throughout the ages. May the end of all *golus* come speedily in our days. Happy *Chanuka*.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

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