

LECH LECHA (GENESIS 12:1-17:27)

A Covenant of Dedication

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

In the end of this week's Torah reading, we are introduced to the *Mitzvah* of *Bris Milah*, the Covenant of Circumcision. This *Mitzvah*, more than any other, is the sign of the eternal pact between G-d and the children of Abraham. In fact, one of the blessings recited at the *Bris* thanks G-d for giving us the commandment "*lehachneeso bivriso shel Avraham Aveenu* -- to enter the child into the Covenant of our father Abraham."

One of my favorite stories that I like to tell when I am performing a *Bris* is about a Mohel in what was then known as the Soviet Union, who one day heard an ominous knock on his door. He opened the door to find two KGB agents who accused him of being a Mohel, a profession that was illegal in the Soviet Union. They told him to pack his belongings and to come with them. He said goodbye to his wife and children, suspecting that he might never see them again.

After a long and silent trip by train and car, the KGB agents brought him to a large building. They instructed him to go inside and do what he would be told.

Upon entering the building, the rabbi found the very last thing he expected -- dozens of Jewish parents with sons waiting to be circumcised! The project took him 3 days!

Before performing the *Bris* on a 2-year-old, he received an unusual request from the mother. "Please," she begged, "as soon as you have performed the *Bris*, give me my son to hold."

The Mohel explained that his usual procedure was to put on a dressing and make sure that everything was stable before giving the baby to the mother. But this mother was insistent that she hold the baby immediately.

The Mohel performed the *Bris* and handed the child to his mother who embraced him, kissed him, and fainted flat out on the floor!

When a *Bris* is performed on a 2-year-old, there is usually more bleeding and the event is much more traumatic for the baby and the mother, so everyone assumed that that was the reason she had passed out. However, the mother later explained what had happened.

"When this baby was born two years ago," she explained, "I knew how hard it would be to arrange for his *Bris*. I knew that it would be illegal and dangerous, and I was afraid that I might get lazy and try to delay his *Bris*. So, in order to make sure that I would never falter in my efforts to do this *Mitzvah*, I gave myself an additional incentive. I swore two years ago that until my son would be ushered into the Covenant of Abraham, I would never kiss him."

That is the real reason she passed out. After two years of withholding her natural maternal instincts, she was totally overcome with emotion.

This is the meaning of the *Briso shel Avraham Aveenu*, the Covenant of Abraham. There is something special about the children of Abraham, the Nation of Israel, who understand that sometimes doing the right thing has to hurt a little; sometimes we have to make sacrifices for what we believe in.

Abraham was called a Hebrew, an '*Ivri*', from the word *Eiver* -- across. Abraham was considered to be on one side of the river and the rest of the world was on the other. Abraham was totally unfazed by being "across the river" from the rest of the world. He was not afraid to march to the tune of a different drummer. He knew what was right and did it with pride.

Thank G-d, we live in a country where we are permitted to practice our beliefs freely and openly. We don't have to sneak a Mohel to a *Bris*. We don't have to worry that we may lose our jobs if we don't work on Shabbos.

As easy as it is to be observant here, we often find ourselves being lax in fulfilling our covenantal obligations. What are we afraid of? Are we concerned that the secret police may knock on our doors? Thank G-d, that's not an issue here. Could it be that we're afraid of being '*Ivri*'-- across the river, of standing out and being different from our friends and neighbors?

Let us remember our father Abraham, who stood up to the world and spoke openly and proudly about his then-controversial beliefs. Let us remember that righteous Jewish mother who stood up to the Soviet Union and made her son a part of Abraham's Treaty with G-d. America's Founding Fathers, by the grace of our Father in Heaven, have given us a gift -- the gift of religious freedom. Let us make sure not to squander it.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz