

TAZRIA (LEVITICUS 12:1-15:33)

No 'Short Cuts' To the Bris

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

This week's Torah Portion opens with a list of Commandments pertaining to a woman after childbirth. It starts with the birth of a boy:

"...and on the eighth, day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Leviticus, 12: 3)

The Talmud tells us that this Mitzvah, of circumcision on the eighth day, is so essential that it actually supersedes the prohibition of causing a wound on Shabbos. Observing the "Mitzvah of the Eighth Day," as it were, is more important than observing the "Mitzvah of the Seventh Day."

There is an interesting dispute between two great rabbis in the Talmud. (Shabbos, 130a). Rabbi Eliezer is of the opinion that one may do whatever needs to be done in order to facilitate a Shabbos Bris. If, for example, there is no knife available at the location where the Bris is to take place, the mohel is permitted to bring a knife from elsewhere, in violation of Shabbos. He may even, in Rabbi Eliezer's opinion, light a fire that would provide sufficient heat to forge a steel knife.

[I assume that if Rabbi Eliezer were living today, he would permit a Mohel to get into his car on a Saturday morning and drive to the Bris. However, it is important to note that Rabbi Eliezer's opinion is rejected, as we will see below. Any Mohel who would drive to a Saturday Bris is considered a Sabbath violator, and should be disqualified from performing Brisses ANY DAY of the week.]

Rabbi Akiva disagrees with Rabbi Eliezer. "Any work that could have been done before Shabbos, (for example, making/bringing the knife, driving to the Bris on Friday, etc.) does NOT set aside the laws of Shabbos. Only if it could NOT have been done before Shabbos, (i.e., the Bris itself) does it supersede Shabbos."

Rabbi Akiva takes the position that there is no excuse for not doing everything in your power to avoid desecrating the Sabbath. If you could have made the knife before Shabbos, and you didn't, it's your own fault! You're too far away on Saturday morning? Too bad! Why didn't you take care of this yesterday? No dispensation. No Shabbos Bris. See you on Sunday!

Rabbi Akiva is teaching us a lesson about Bris that we can apply to life in general.

There are certain things that we are capable of doing. There are certain things that are beyond our ability. G-d doesn't expect us to go beyond our ability. But He doesn't let us off the hook too easily. There is no excuse for not doing everything you can.

I don't have a right to say, "Okay, G-d, I'm going to smoke and drink and be irresponsible. Please make sure I stay healthy."

We can't sit back and say, "I'm not going to make any effort to support myself and my family; G-d will provide." Manna delivery expired in Joshua's time. We have to make the effort, and pray to G-d that the efforts succeed.

Our brethren in the Middle East are in grave danger. There are many things that we are not capable of doing. We are not capable of making Arafat into a lover of Jews, justice, and peace. We are not capable of disabling every gun and bomb in Judea and Samaria. We are not capable of ending all the bloodshed and beginning a Messianic era by ourselves.

We ARE, however, capable of writing to Washington, (and perhaps GOING there this Monday!) We ARE capable of writing to (and perhaps boycotting!) the New York Times. We ARE capable of sending donations (and perhaps GOING!) to Israel to provide the support she desperately needs. We ARE capable of praying our hearts out to G-d to put an end to this frightful situation.

And so we must. As Rabbi Akiva would say, there is no excuse for not trying.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz