

TAZRIA (LEVITICUS 12:1-15:33)

Dueling Brisses

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

What do you do when you have conflicting responsibilities?

G-d instructed Moses to tell the Israelites to observe the Sabbath:

*The Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, making it a day of rest for all generations, as an eternal covenant (“Bris”). It is a sign that during six days G-d made Heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested... (*Exodus, 31:16-17)

On Shabbos, we rest. We demonstrate our belief in the Genesis account of Creation by emulating G-d and resting on the seventh day. That is part of our “*eternal Covenant/Bris*.” We may not engage in creative labor. We may not cook, plant, or build. We may not transport items or slaughter animals. We may not shear a lamb or cause a wound. That, too, is part of our “*eternal Covenant/Bris*.”

Against this backdrop, we open this week’s Torah Portion, and discover a conflicting covenant:

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

The Torah requires us to circumcise a boy on the eighth day of his life. This Mitzvah too is a **Bris**, a covenant.

Which *Bris* takes precedence, the Sabbath or the circumcision? Do we transgress the Sabbath by inflicting a wound on an eight-day-old boy, or do we wait until Sunday? The Talmud tells us that the Mitzvah of circumcision supersedes the prohibition against wounding on Shabbos. (See "No 'Short Cuts' To The Bris") A Bris, which is technically work, is performed on the eighth day, even if it is Yom Kippur! (Yes, I work on Shabbos!!!)

Thus, we see that the Bris of circumcision is more important than the Bris of Shabbos. Or is it?

It has been pointed out that one of the reasons that the Bris takes place on the eighth day of life is so that every child can experience at least one Shabbos before his Bris. Shabbos is a special day of spirituality that uplifts us and makes us holy.

The Talmud observes that the Mitzvah of Bris has been observed by our People with joy. It pains me that the same thing cannot necessarily be said about the Sabbath. For some reason, strict Shabbos observance seems to be relegated to the devout few. Perhaps the reason is that a Bris comes only a few times in a parent's life. Shabbos is a life-long, weekly commitment.

A Mohel once asked Rabbi Moshe Feinstein whether he should perform a Bris on Saturday if the people attending the Bris are desecrating the Sabbath (turning on lights, etc.) in his presence. Rabbi Feinstein responded that the Mohel is obligated to perform the Bris on the eighth day, regardless of what others are doing. However, he added, one should not be present when others violate the Sabbath. Simply observing others engaging in forbidden activities is inappropriate, said Rabbi Feinstein. Therefore, the Mohel is required to leave as soon as possible!

(It is interesting to note that some authorities disagree with Rabbi Feinstein's ruling. There are some rabbis who point out that the Mitzvah of performing a Bris only supersedes the prohibition of cutting. It does not permit driving, music, or photography. These rabbis rule that if performing a Bris on Shabbos will cause so many participants to violate the Sabbath in so many ways, it is better to postpone the Bris until Sunday. One Mohel I know was requested to perform a Bris on a Saturday afternoon. He lived ten miles away, but he was prepared to walk. "If you make the commitment to me that all of your guests will stay within walking distance for the entire Shabbos, I will come on Saturday and do the Bris. But if my agreement to perform the Bris on Saturday means that you will have guests driving on our holy Sabbath, I am not permitted to come.")

Several years ago I spoke with a lady who had decided to do me a favor and act as my "representative." "I was talking to Mrs. _____," she told me. "I was trying to convince her to come to your synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, but she said she'd rather pray at home because it is too far to walk. I explained to her that under those circumstances, I am sure Rabbi Seplowitz would agree that it is better to ride to synagogue than to stay home. Right?"

Not quite. I tried to explain to her that synagogue attendance, while it is a very worthwhile endeavor, is not mandatory. One is permitted to pray at home. Driving on the Sabbath, however, entails the violation of Biblical restrictions. (One such prohibition would be igniting flames by use of the internal combustion engine.) One may not desecrate the Sabbath in order to "observe" it.

The Torah makes it a point to tell us that we may perform a Bris even if the eighth day comes out on Shabbos. Bris is an exception to the general rule. Only THIS Mitzvah (and a few others that are clearly spelled out to us) permits us to "ignore" the otherwise Sabbath-prohibited activity. In all other cases, we must adhere to the Sabbath laws. The end does not justify the means.

This, by the way, is one of the reasons that I try to update my Torah Talks and send them out early in the week. I try to avoid sending emails to non-observant Jews on Fridays. While I can't prevent others from engaging in forbidden activities, I don't want to be the catalyst of Sabbath violation. So please do me (and yourself!) a favor. If you haven't had a chance to read the latest Torah Talk before Friday at Sundown, please wait till Saturday night! (Alternatively, you could print it out on Friday afternoon, and read it at your leisure!)

Sabbath observance is considered as testimony. By sanctifying G-d's holy day, we testify our belief that He is in charge. We demonstrate our belief that He created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. "... *It is a sign that during six days G-d made Heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested...*"

For six days we work and strive to build G-d's world. The Seventh day is special. The Seventh day is G-d's Day of Rest. The Seventh day is our day to recharge our spiritual batteries. The Seventh day is a Covenant, a Bris.

And it doesn't hurt a bit!

Have a great Shabbos.

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