

Beyond Nature's Limits

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This week we will read in the Torah about the first two mitzvot of the nation of Israel: Brit milah and the mitzvah of Kiddush Hachodesh, to sanctify the new month. Brit milah is the first mitzvah in which our ancestor Abraham, the head of the nation, was commanded. "And God said to Abraham: and you shall keep My covenant... that every male among you be circumcised". The Mitzvah of Brit is repeated in the beginning of our Parsha "And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised". In addition to the reading of this week's Torah portion, we will read the Rosh Chodesh Torah portion that teaches the Korbanot of Rosh Chodesh and Parshat Hachodesh, which starts with the Mitzvah of Kiddush Hachodesh. Parshat Hachodesh is the first mitzvah of the nation as a nation. It was given while they were in Egypt, even before the commandment of the Passover sacrifice made on the eve of the liberation in Egypt.

Ostensibly, Brit Milah and Kiddush Hachodesh are very different commandments from each other. Why were they both chosen to be the first commandments, The Brit for our father Abraham and Kiddush Hachodesh for the nation of Israel as a nation?

Midrash Tanchuma on the Parsha (Tazria 7) describes a dialogue between Rabbi Akiva and the evil Tornosuropus regarding circumcision. Tornosuropus asked Rabbi Akiva who has more beautiful deeds, G-d or humans. To Tornosuropus' astonishment, Rabbi Akiva replied that human deeds are more beautiful. As an example Rabbi Akiva brought wheat sheafs and baked bread. Obviously, the bread is considered better than the wheat although the wheat was created by Hashem. That is because Hashem created the world incomplete so that we could complete his creation. In the same way, said Rabbi Akiva, the circumcision we make comes to complete the miraculous creation called man. The essence of the mitzvah of Brit Milah is to transcend the world of raw nature. The purpose of the mitzvah is to take the grain, the raw person, and make us holy.

A similar idea underlies the mitzvah of sanctifying the month. Seemingly, the concept of time is completely out of our control. We cannot slow down time, move back in time or evade the effects of time. But Kiddush Hachodesh teaches about our ability to give meaning to time. We can not go back a day, but we can decide what kind of day it will be. The Beit Din, as the representatives of the nation, has the authority to determine which day will be Rosh Chodesh and thus when exactly will the holidays be. The Gemara in the Rosh Hashanah (25a) says that even if Beit Din sanctified the month on the wrong date, that will be the day of Rosh CHodesh.

Brit Millah and kiddush Hachodesh are different commandments, but they both have a common denominator; Both commandments teach us about our ability to give meaning and holiness to the world in which we live. Material and time don't control us - we can decide what they will be. We can elevate the material world and even give special meaning and holiness to each day.

A moment before the creation of the people of Israel, a moment before Hashem told Avraham that he will have a son and a moment before the commandment of the Passover sacrifice eaten on the night before the Exodus from Egypt, we are given out purpose a nation. Our goal as a free nation is to elevate the physical world and time. We have the ability to bring holiness into this world and we have the responsibility to do so.

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