

Lech Lecha

Lech Lecha strikes us as the first Parsha in the Torah that talks about the Land of Israel. In fact, on four occasions in this very Parsha, G-d promises the land to Abraham. Curiously, in the final promise (Chapter 17), G-d commands him to circumcise himself and promises the land again to him and his descendants. What is the connection between circumcision and the Land?

We refer to the mitzvah of milah as “brit milah,” the covenant of circumcision, and not simply as mitzvat milah, the commandment of circumcision. The covenant revolves around the land of Israel, as the promise to give the land to the Jews is also referred to as a covenant. We say this explicitly in the beginning of the daily morning prayers, where we quote several verses from Chronicles 1, chapter 16. “Remember His covenant forever, that He made with Abraham and his vow to Isaac, for Israel an everlasting covenant. Saying, ‘To you I will give the land of Canaan, the lot of your heritage.’” Later in the same section of the daily prayer service, we say a verse from Nehemiah 9 again referring to the covenant regarding the land of Israel. “You found Abraham’s heart faithful before You, and You established the covenant with him to give him the land of the Canaanite, Hittite, etc. to give it to his offspring.” On a day when a circumcision will be done in the synagogue, some congregations customarily chant this last verse aloud from the point that mentions the covenant because this covenant was established in conjunction with the mitzvah of milah. If the mitzvah of milah and the promise to receive the Land are both defined as covenants and given to Abraham in the same prophetic revelation, the nature of these covenants must be similar. Now we can deepen our original question: in what way do these covenants complement or reinforce one another?

Although we do not claim to know all of the reasons for the mitzvot, we try to understand the mitzvot to the best of our ability. Maimonides and other early commentators suggest the mitzvah of milah is specifically done on the part of the body involved with the most lustful and physical activity in order for man to subordinate his most animalistic drives to the service of Hashem. In the blessing we say after a milah, we call the circumcision a “sign of the holy covenant.” Holiness in the Torah refers not to some spiritual state achieved by hiking for miles into the quiet woods, sitting in solitude and meditating. Rather, holiness requires a person transcending his physical existence and elevating his everyday, normal activities by conducting them in line with the Torah’s principles. Therefore, great levels of holiness can actually be reached precisely in the most physical of activities.

By commanding Abraham to circumcise himself at the same time of sealing the covenant with him about the land of Israel, G-d shows Abraham something about the nature of the land. Right after listing the various forbidden intimate physical relationships, The Torah says (Leviticus 20:22-23) that

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the land of Israel spits out people who do not observe these laws. G-d underscores this point by giving Abraham a mitzvah which will remind him and his descendants to keep their bodies holy, precisely at the time He promises them the Land. This reinforces the covenant to give the Jewish people the land. Covenants in the Torah typically involve commitments from two sides, whether between two people or between man and G-d. For example, the blessings and curses delineated in the Torah as reward and punishment for keeping or violating the Torah are called (Deut. 28:69) “the words of the covenant.” Here too, although G-d promised Abraham’s descendants the land of Israel.

Based on this understanding, we can explain a seemingly awkward line in the second blessing of the Grace after meals. While the first blessing focuses on thanking G-d for the food, the second blessing is called by the Talmud “the Blessing for the Land.” It starts with thanks to Hashem for giving us the land as a heritage and goes on to thank Hashem for taking us out of Egypt. Then, the blessing thanks G-d “for the covenant you sealed in our flesh and for the Torah You taught us.” This is based on the Talmud’s requirement (Berachot 48b) to mention the covenant of circumcision and the receiving of the Torah in this blessing. I understand G-d showed His love for us by taking us out of the Egyptian exile, giving us the Torah, and bringing us to Israel. But what relevance does the mitzvah of milah have to any of this? Also, as one of the 613 commandments, is milah not included in the subsequent phrase “and for the laws You made known to us?” Rashi (ibid.) explains, “through circumcision the land was given to Abraham.” Rashi then says that through milah specifically and through the Torah and its mitzvot in general, the Jewish people merited to receive the land of Israel. So the blessing focuses not simply on the gift of the land of Israel, but also for the mitzvot which help us maintain our hold on this gift. The mitzvah of milah and the holiness that Jews attain by sacrificing to do this mitzvah, enable them to merit the gift of the land.

This understanding also sheds light on the order of the mitzvot given thus far in the book of Genesis. The first mitzvah given to man is to procreate and multiply, and the animal kingdom also gets this “instruction.” The very next command, and essentially the first command that is given only to people and not to animals, is the mitzvah of milah. While man and animal both reproduce, man is called upon to sanctify his body through milah. This “kedushat haguf,” sanctity of the body, precedes the Torah and mitzvot which are not formally introduced until the book of Exodus. It would seem the Torah’s message is that before we learn the Torah at Mt. Sinai which will sanctify our minds intellectually, first we must sanctify our bodies through the mitzvah of milah.

Shabbat Shalom
The JSN Team

