

Weekly Teaching

October 27, 2017

God then said to Abraham: "This is My covenant that you and your descendants after you are to observe: let every male among you be circumcised... It shall become a sign of the covenant between us. And in all your generations, let every eight-day-old boy among you be circumcised..." (Genesis 17:9-12)

The word Mitzvah, which means "Commandment," is often mistakenly translated to mean a "good deed." Mitzvot are our particularistic Jewish prescription for how we are to interact with God and every aspect of living a holy life within the world that God has gifted to us.

I once heard a person assert that the 10 Commandments is God's Test; "If you get 6 out of 10, you pass." However as Jews we are obliged to follow them as commanded to and not to view them as God's suggestions. The 4th Commandment is to "remember" and "observe" the Sabbath. The 4th Commandment is not: "If you have the time, and you feel like it, remember and observe the Sabbath."

Our Jewish prescription for embracing a life of Mitzvot doesn't consider convenience to be a variable by which we factor into our Jewish lives. Each Jew must find his or her own way by which to incorporate the embrace of their Jewish Covenantal relationship with God, but, we don't consider this constant Jewish pursuit of holiness to be "optional."

When a Jewish parent is asked what they most want for their child, the answer often is "I want my child to be happy and healthy."

What often goes unstated in what true happiness and health means to them is the Jewish foundation perspective. A life devoid of spiritual meaning, lacking an anchor of faith and cast away from one's own Jewish heritage, isn't a Jewish definition of either being happy or healthy.

When children ask: "Why must I go to Hebrew School"? Parents often don't know how to fully articulate their feelings of being anchored in their Covenantal relationship, and to their wanting to assure safe harbor for the next generations to come.

This feeling of uncertainty for how to articulate the feelings of fidelity to God, Torah and the Jewish People often begins with the birth of a son, when we are commanded by God to perform the Mitzvah of B'rit Milah, ritual circumcision.

The ritual for daughters is so much easier. It is a naming ceremony, devoid of any medical procedures, by which we enter our daughters into the Covenant. But, for a son, B'rit Milah does bring discomfort both physically and emotionally.

If God merely wanted our sons to be happy, a very different Jewish ritual could have been chosen. Circumcision hurts, and for a few minutes, it makes the baby very unhappy. But, it's one of the oldest Jewish rituals that God commands of us, beginning with our patriarch Abraham, and his son Isaac.

For almost 4000 years, we have observed the covenant of B'rit Milah, even when the outside world forbade the practice, and sought out means of punishment should Jews adhere to this ritual.

As Jews, we reject the notion that life is only about what getting what we want, when and where we want it. B'rit Milah might not be what the individual might choose. But the pursuit of holiness makes us ultimately our happiest. The world God gifted to us is imperfect and it is our job to partner with God to try every day to perfect it. The male Jewish infant is born "not fully made," and our first ritual commandment is to remove the baby boy's foreskin so as to partner with God in this act creating "perfection."

After the Mitzvah of B'rit Milah is performed the parents can then declare: "In the manner that our son has entered the Covenant so may he live a holy life anchored in his possession of his Torah and the performance of God's Commandments."

Shabbat Shalom,
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