

PARASHAH FOURTEEN

Genesis 17:1–27; Isaiah 63:10–19; Romans 4:10–25

notes by Tim Hegg

The Sign of the Covenant in Your Flesh

Circumcision is introduced in our *parashah* as the sign of the covenant. From its introduction in ancient times up to the present, circumcision has been an enigma to the world at large, and at times, even to some Jews. The Sages group circumcision with those commandments (צִוּוּת, *chuqqim*) which we obey, not because we can understand a good reason for it, but simply because HaShem gave us the commandment. Of course, circumcision was known and practised even before it was given to Abraham as the sign of the covenant. Records of other ancient peoples evidence its existence, though with marked differences. In all other cultures the act was performed as a rite of passage to marriage upon young men prior to their wedding. In other cultures, so-called female circumcision was known as well. Only in Israel was circumcision done to the infant, and reserved entirely for the male children. We know that the Egyptians practised a partial cutting of the foreskin, something the Israelites must have adopted while slaves, for it may be that “rolling away of the reproach of Egypt” (Joshua 5:9) is to be understood as “completing” the partial circumcision done after the custom of the Egyptians (which consisted of a single lateral cut in the foreskin).

Taken by itself, the ritual of circumcision seems very strange as a religious symbol or sign. It has been mocked by unbelievers, misunderstood by the Christian church, and considered barbaric and antiquated by modern society. The basic trend in our own times by many health professionals is to discourage what has been a common practice in America and Europe, i.e., circumcising all male children at infancy. Though there is good medical evidence that circumcision affords a number of health benefits, it is increasingly considered unnecessary and even cruel. “Why,” we might ask, “would God have chosen this for the sign of the covenant He had made with Abram?” How does circumcision fulfill the role of the “sign” of the covenant, meaning it represents a core or crucial aspect of the covenant?

The obvious answer, at least in my opinion, comes from the narrative structure of our text. The promise, initially given in chapter 12, is tested when famine comes to the Land and Abram, with Sarai, descend to Egypt for food. It is further tested when, returning to the Land, Abram and Lot must divide from each other. It’s final testing is the lack of a son which, Abram rightly understands, is necessary for the promises of the covenant to be realized. An eternal covenant which lasts only one generation is hardly eternal! Chapter 15 resolves the issue for Abraham, not by the appearance of the promised son (Abram was willing to substitute Eliezar his servant), but by the word of HaShem promising the son, and Abram’s faith in God’s promise. Yet Abram’s faith would be tested by time. The promise was secure in HaShem’s omnipotence, but from Abram’s perspective, it was simply taking too long! “Perhaps,” he may have reasoned, “God expects me to do something to bring about the promise.” With the suggestion from Sarai that Hagar be used for just such a purpose (a proposal which met with full acceptance in the pagan cultures of the day), the narrative punctuates the event with the rapid succession of verbs to show how quickly the plan was implemented: Sarai took Hagar, gave her to Abram, he went in to her, and she conceived. In what was for the narrative a mere sentence, Abram had solved the dilemma of his faith (that the promise of God was taking too much time) in his own way, by his own strength. Ishmael, of course, was the “solution.”

But God’s way was not Abram’s way. The promised son, a foreshadowing of *the* Son of Promise, would need to come, not by common means of procreation, but by entirely above human means, by miraculous intervention of HaShem Himself. This, of course, was the reason God was waiting—He wanted the time to pass so that common procreation between Abram and Sarai would be recognized as impossible. Then, into that realm of the impossible God would bring the chosen

son as the miracle of His own omnipotence, and all would know that the covenant was maintained, not by the strength of man, but by His unchanging power and faithfulness.

It now becomes clear why circumcision, the sign of the covenant, is reserved for our text in chapter 17. The Hagar event had challenged the Divine plan for bringing the promised son. If the heart of the covenant is to be preserved (i.e., “in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed”), and if the promised son to Abram and Sarai is to prefigure the ultimate and final Seed in whom the promises will be realized, then Abram and every generation which comes from him must realize that God’s promise of the Coming One will be accomplished, not through normal means of procreation, but through a miraculous birth. Thus, the organ of procreation, in this case the normal or human means of procuring offspring, receives a cutting, and the flesh is discarded. In this symbolic ritual, the heart of the covenant is revealed: the coming son will appear through miraculous means, not through human effort. And each successive generation from Abraham, applying the sign of the covenant to the infant male child, was repeating this truth, that the Promised One, the Messiah, would come, not through normal means of procreation, but by the miraculous workings of HaShem Himself. When Yeshua did arrive, He came via Miriam, a virgin who conceived, not by normal means, but by the Ruach HaKodesh in a miraculous and mysterious way.

We can now understand why circumcision was chosen as the sign of the covenant—that which points to the covenant’s most significant reality. It signalled the coming of the Promised One by miraculous birth, and thus when Yeshua arrived, not through the normal means of procreation, but through the mysterious and miraculous virgin birth, circumcision as the sign of the covenant was fully realized. Indeed, both in our text as well as in the Apostolic Scriptures (Rom 4:19ff; Heb 11:11-12), the fact that Abram and Sarai both appeared well beyond the age capable of having children, illustrates that Isaac was a miracle baby, even beyond the fact that every birth is a miracle. For while the birth of Isaac, had it been at the time in their lives when they were younger, would have been accepted as “normal” or “natural,” his birth in their old age was understood by all as a direct miracle by God on their behalf.

Of course, the ritual of circumcision took on a different significance in the nation of Israel as she wandered further and further away from the faith in HaShem in which she was called to walk. Rather than understanding circumcision as a sign of the Promised One, circumcision became a self-identity—a sign of Israelite status. By the time of Yeshua, circumcision had been more strongly attached to the giving of the Torah at Sinai than to the promise given to Abraham. Moreover, its use as a status marker was so prevalent that it became the primary focus of the proselyte’s ritual (though admittedly in the 1st Century this was still being debated by some Sages.) This is one of the reasons we often have difficulty understanding Paul’s teachings on circumcision. If, as I have said, circumcision was (in its final analysis) a sign of the miraculous birth of Messiah, why would it ever be prohibited to God-fearing non-Jews? What we must understand, however, about Paul’s use of the word “circumcision” is that it is a short-hand way of identifying the rabbinic ritual of proselytizing as well as the native born Jew. Indeed, Paul can use the term “circumcision” to mean “Jews” (Eph 2:11; Col 4:11; Tit 1:10). It seems clear when this is kept in mind that what Paul is teaching against when he is telling the non-Jews not to be circumcised was the widely held notion that only Israelites had a place in the world to come (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1, the Gemara is found at b. *Sanhedrin* 90a). If, as was being taught, only those with Jewish status are members of Israel, and only Israelites have a place in the world to come, then for a non-Jew to secure eternal life would require “becoming a Jew” through proselytization. This, Paul argues, would amount to salvation by the works of the Torah, something he knows is impossible. Therefore, showing that Abraham himself, the first to be given circumcision, was justified not by his circumcision (which, for the 1st Century Sages was viewed as making him a Jew) but by faith. Paul stresses to the Jew and non-Jew alike that ethnic status does not secure covenant membership for anyone. Rather, eternal salvation is by faith alone apart from any ritual of becoming a proselyte. Circumcision, rather than *securing* covenant membership, is a *sign* of covenant membership already possessed *by faith*. It points to the One through Whom salvation comes, even Yeshua the Messiah, born by the miracle of the Ruach,

Who is the object of faith for all who participate in the same faith that Abraham had.

We note that in the instructions to Abram regarding circumcision, not only were male family members to be circumcised, but also foreigners who were purchased as servants, as well as male children that were born to them. How should we understand this wide application of the covenant sign?

It seems clear on the basis of v. 14 that the individual himself is the one who makes the determination regarding covenant membership: “But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” Note the clear statement “*he* has broken My covenant.” We might ask what scenario such a statement envisions. First, the decision not to be circumcised is obviously made by the man himself, indicating that he is old enough to make this decision. A father who neglected the commandment to circumcise his eight day old son does not, in such neglect, render his son outside of the covenant. Secondly, note carefully that the text states “he shall be cut off from his people,” indicating that he is considered to be a *bona fide* member of the covenant people until such time as he refused to accept the covenant sign of circumcision. Thus, in such a scenario, there would come a time when as an adult member of the family, the son would have to obey the commandment himself, and become circumcised. It would be his own decision at that time, not that of his father, that would indicate his willingness or refusal to follow God’s commandment of circumcision, which in turn would be a sign of his faith or lack thereof. This “waiting period” between the time of his birth and the point at which he would personally make a decision regarding circumcision, may be illustrative of how we should understand the circumcision of foreigners who desired to be attached to Israel’s God. As in the situation in which a father neglected the commandment of circumcision, and the covenant status of that male child awaited his own personal obedience to the commandment, so foreigners who entered the people of Israel with the intention of being full-fledged covenant members were received with the idea that eventually, after they had understood the commandments and what was required of them, they would receive circumcision as the sign of faith in the God of the covenant in Whom they had already believed. In the event that, in time, they refused to accept the covenant sign, such disobedience would point to their lack of true faith, and would render them outside of the covenant. This would be no different than the scenario in which a male who *was* circumcised on the eighth day rebelled against God’s commandments as an adult and was likewise “cut off from his people.” Circumcision was to be a sign of the covenant in that the covenant itself is based upon faith—a faith that God is the covenant-making God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that He will fulfill His promises even though such fulfillment might seem impossible from man’s viewpoint.

In our *parashah*, in which God first gives the commandment of circumcision as the sign of the covenant to Abraham, those foreigners in his household were apparently not given much time to consider how they would respond to the commandment of circumcision. The Hagar event had proven too devastating to allow a mixture in the household of Abraham, the family in which God’s covenant would be initially planted. Thus, one would think that servants within Abraham’s household who refused to affirm their place as covenant members through accepting circumcision, were dismissed, for in such a refusal, they would have likewise indicated a desire to remain attached to their pagan ways and idols. God’s promise to bless Abraham was founded upon the need for Abraham and his family to possess true faith and the faithfulness (i.e., obedience) such faith always produces (cf. 18:19).

Thus, the covenant is renewed to Abram, promising the son of God’s choice who would come through God’s divine intervention.

The notice in our *parashah* that Abram was 99 years old is given to heighten the narrative tension: time has run out for Abram and Sarai to have children. This is most likely why God reveals himself as אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי, *El Shaddai*. Traditionally this Name has been understood to mean “God Almighty,” since “Shaddai” is taken from שָׁדַד, *shadad*, a Semitic root (apparently derived from an Arabic root) meaning “strong,” or “mighty.” However, the Hebrew Shaddai may also be based

upon the word שָׂד, *shad*, meaning “breast.” This would give the sense of “the God Who nurses,” or “the God Who gives the ability to nurse.” Interestingly, all of the places in Genesis where *El Shaddai* occurs are when the birth of children is the primary concern, especially when women are barren (28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3). I would suggest that when God reveals Himself as *El Shaddai*, He is making Himself known as the God Who gives children. That perfectly fits the context of our *parashah* as well.

Thus, our text is divided nicely by the use of “I” in verse four, the use of “you” in verse nine, and “as for Sarai” in v. 15. God begins by saying “here’s what I will do.” Then in verse nine He says, “and here’s what you are to do,” and in v. 15, “here’s what will happen with Sarai.” God, on His part, reaffirms the covenant promises to Abram, and then He requires Abram to receive the sign of circumcision, a seal of the faith he already has, but in this case, particularly emphasizing his trust that God will provide the promised son in His own miraculous way, a miracle by giving to Sarai a son when she is beyond child-bearing.

Verse one makes it clear that Abram already had genuine faith. “Walk before Me and be blameless.” But the verb “walk” (הִתְהַלֵּךְ, *hithaleich*) is in the *hitpael* rather than the normal *qal* stem, and this most likely means “Keep on walking before Me and be blameless.” That is, “continue to walk by faith, and especially in the matter of trusting Me for the promised son.”

It is in the context, then, of the renewal of the covenant promises to Abram, and specifically in the call for Abram to trust God for the promised son, that Abram’s name is changed to Abraham. But exactly how the meaning given in the text is to be derived, we are not sure. God states that Abram’s name would be changed to Abraham “for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.” Most consider Hebrew *ham* to be an abbreviated form of *hamon* (הַמּוֹן), “multitude.” Thus, *av hamon* means “a father of a multitude.” But what of the *resh*? The Sages simply think the *resh* should be disregarded in terms of the meaning of the name (Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 46.7). There is an Arabic root, *racham*, meaning “multitude,” but this root does not occur in Hebrew. Ibn Ezra suggests that the letters of Abraham’s name are abbreviations: אַבְרָם for אָבִיר, ‘*avir*,’ “mighty one;” ה for הַמּוֹן, *hamon*, “multitude,” and ם for גּוֹיִם, *goyim*, “nations,” thus, “a mighty one of the multitude of nations.” Obviously, the precise manner in which the name change reflects the given meaning is illusive. Most likely we are dealing with ancient Semitic roots and etymologies that have subsequently been lost.

Sarai’s name change may actually be connected to the new name Jacob receives (Gen 32:29). Jacob “strives with God and man,” and the verb “strive” has the same consonants as does the name Sarah (שָׂרָה, “to strive;” שָׂרָה, “Sarah”). Changing her name to Sarah is a foreshadow of her being the mother from whom the nation of Israel would eventually come. Of course, the fact that Sarah may also contain the root שָׂר, *sar*, “prince,” gives rise to the promise: “kings (often parallel in Hebrew to “prince”) will come from her.”

Such a fantastic promise, given to Sarah in her old age, prompts laughter from Abraham. It appears to be laughter of amazement. “Is it possible that a child would be born to a man 99 years old, whose wife is 90?” So Abraham implores God regarding Ishmael. He is there and already a member of Abraham’s family. Why not just accept him as the covenant son? But God’s ways are not man’s ways. God has determined that the son of promise would not come by normal means of procreation, but by the specific, miraculous act of God alone. Abraham’s laughter of amazement is a portend of Isaac (the name means “laughter”). In the face of the impossible, God will show Himself sovereign. For in the promised son Isaac, God intends to foreshadow the birth of His own Son, our Messiah, Yeshua.

In the end, the emphasis in both the change of Abraham’s name as well as Sarah’s is that God will overcome their inability, and give to them the promised son. They simply must await by faith the hand of God.

Our *parashah* ends with the notice that Abraham was obedient to God’s directives.

Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were

bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him.

The obedience of Abraham was the proof of his faith. The sign of the covenant, circumcision, had been given well after the covenant itself had been promised. Abraham, the one who had exercised faith, showed himself faithful.

What, then, are we to make of the unconditional covenant? Had not God promised the blessings to Abraham and his descendants in a display of unconditional covenant making (Gen 15)? Has the covenant now become conditional upon obedience, upon receiving circumcision as the sign of the covenant? Here we note the covenant on two levels: corporate and individual. As far as the covenant being secured to the future generations of Abraham, it depends entirely and only upon God. Even if many forsook the covenant in any given generation, God will be faithful to maintain its viability as He has promised. Each generation of Abraham's offspring will come under the eternal blessings of the covenant. But as to whether a given individual enjoys the blessings of the covenant himself or herself, and whether he or she finds within the covenant the message of the gospel (cf. Gal 3:8), this depends upon faith, itself a gift from God. Thus, in every generation, God will preserve a remnant unto Himself (cf. Is 10:22; Rom 9:27), and this is the prayer of Isaiah in our *haftarah* portion.

The Apostolic section is based upon our Torah portion. Paul emphasizes that Abraham's covenant standing occurred, not after he was circumcised (reckoned as a Jew by the rabbis of Paul's day) but before, while uncircumcised. Thus, his righteous standing before God was not a matter of his ethnic status, but the result of God's election and gift of faith. So those who may rightly call Abraham their father are those who also participate in the same faith that Abraham had, that is, faith in regard to the promised Son. But why is Paul concerned about Abraham being the father of believers in the first place? The answer is simple and obvious: the whole plan of God's salvation of sinners is embedded in the covenant made with Abraham. To have Abraham as one's father in truth, is to be the object of God's promised blessing, a blessing secured by Abraham's Seed, that is, our Messiah Yeshua.

