

Parshas Shemini

A Leopard can't change its spots - but a man can...

ספר ויקרא פרק יב
ב (דבר אל בני ישראל לאמר אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר וטמאה שבעת ימים כימי נדת דוּתה:
תטמא:
ג: (וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו
3) And on the eighth day you shall circumcise the flesh of the Arah
ספר החינוך - מצוה ב
משרשי מצוה זו, לפי שרצה השם יתברך לקבוע בעם אשר הבדיל להיות נקרא על שמו או
קבוע בגופם, להבדילם משאר העמים בצורת גופם כמו שהם מובדלים מהם בצורת נפשם
ורצה להיות ההשלמה על ידי האדם, ולא בראו שלם מבטן, לרמוז אליו כי כאשר תשלום
גופו על ידו, כן בידו להשלים צורת נפשו בהכשר פעולותיו

Sefer Ha'Chinuch— Mitzvah of Milah

The root of this mitzvah is because HASHEM wanted to permanently place in this nation a sign in their body that would separate them and show them that they belong to HASHEM. Just as their body is distinct from the other nations, so too, is their soul.
HASHEM wanted this completion of the person to be done by a man, and that he not be born that way. This is a sign that just like the body can be perfected by man, so too he is able to perfect his soul.

The Jew has a distinct role amongst the nations

The Sefer HaChinuch explains that HASHEM separated the Jewish people from all the nations. We were given a distinct role in this world. Our lives and everything we do should be different than any other people.

To remind us of this, HASHEM gave us a sign, a permanent reminder of our uniqueness – the Mitzvah of Milah. A change in our bodies shows that just as the body of the Jew is different than that of a Gentile, so too is our soul.

By all rights, the Jewish baby should have been born already circumcised, as this would have more clearly shown that the Jew is unique amongst the peoples. However, there is a second lesson that HASHEM wanted to impart to us. Just like a person can take his body and permanently change it, so too, a person can change his very essence – his Nishoma. Therefore, rather than creating the Jew circumcised at birth, HASHEM gave us this Mitzvah to perform.

Question on the Sefer HaChinuch

If HASHEM wanted us to know that we are a nation apart from any other nation, wouldn't that difference have been more clearly shown had the very

genetic material of the Jewish person been different? The Chinese are clearly distinct from the Occidental. The skin colors of various peoples show them as distinct races. Had the Jew been born circumcised, the entire world would have known that this people is set apart. Throughout the millennium, every person would have

clearly seen that the Jews are unique. From birth they were different, so their very essence is different. Yet that difference has now been lost. Any human can circumcise himself; in fact, many do. Wouldn't it have been a far more powerful lesson for us as a nation to know that we are different because we were born that way?

A leopard can't change its spots

The answer to this question is based on one of the greatest shortcomings of

man – self-limiting beliefs. Often, a person will find himself thinking, "I am what I am. This is my nature, and there is nothing that I can do about it. Granted, I may not be happy with the way that I act, granted I may wish that I were different, but what can I do? This is who I am."

Such thoughts become self-fulfilling. If I sincerely believe I can't change, then in fact I will not be able to. I won't seek out the methods of change, I won't have the motivation necessary to change, and the reality will be that I cannot change. This single concept can be the most damaging idea that ever crosses a person's mind.

We were created to change

The Gra writes, "If not for changing one's character traits, what is the purpose of life?"

Change isn't part of the Torah - it is the focal point of all of our Avodas Hashem. The reason we were put on this planet is to grow. All of the Mitzvahs and beliefs focus on growth. But growth means taking who I am now and changing it. Taking myself from where I am, and willfully, purposefully changing me. Whether it is in character traits, beliefs, trust, or honesty – whether it is in more clearly seeing HASHEM or treating people with greater respect – every part of what the Torah demands of me is about change.

If a person were locked into the idea that he cannot change, then in fact he wouldn't be able to. To such a person, the Torah has no relevance.

The answer to the question on the Sefer HaChinuch seems to be that this concept of man's ability to change is so central to being Jewish that it warranted giving up another essential lesson. It is true that had Jews been born circumcised, it would have taught us that just as our body is different, so too is our soul. That concept would have aided us in recognizing our mission in creation. However, the concept that "I can change the essence of who I am" is far more central to being a practicing Jew, and therefore came at the expense of the weakening the first lesson.

The purpose of life is to change

This idea has great relevance to everything that we do. We often find ourselves mired in thoughts that limit our ability to grow. "That's just the way I am. What can I do? I didn't choose to be born stubborn, or hot tempered, or selfish or arrogant. Ask my Creator why He made me this way."

While it is true, that each individual was created with a different nature and temperament, and it may well be that one person has a greater tendency towards anger, jealousy, or arrogance- the entire focus of our lives is supposed to be towards changing our natures. However, to do that, we must clearly see change as possible, as something within our capacity. For that reason, HASHEM gave us the Mitzvah of Milah to perform so that we can have a permanent reminder of our ability to change.

I would like to thank R' Daniel Goldstein for his help with this Shmuz.

For more on this topic please listen to Shmuz #143-145 The Stages of Change

To receive the Shmuz views weekly, or to listen to any of the Shmuzin FREE, please visit www.TheShmuz.com