Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XI: Vayigash (Gen. 44:18–47:27)

Essay 4. The circumcision of the Egyptians

פָּסוּק "וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו גְּשׁוּ־נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגְּשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחִיכֶם", פֵּרֵשׁ רַשִׁ"י, רָאָה אוֹתָם נְסוֹגִים לְאָחוֹר וְכוּ' וְהֶרְאָה לָהֶם שֶׁהוּא מָהוּל עכ"ל.

"Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come forward to me;' and when they came forward, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, that you sold me to Egypt**.' "**[1] **Rashi explained: "He saw that they recoiled** and he said to himself 'Now my brothers feel ashamed.' He therefore called to them **and showed them that he was circumcised."**[2]

הִקְשׁוּ הַמְּפָרְשִׁים אֵיךְ יַכִּירוּ בְּזֶה שֶׁהוּא יוֹסֵף וְהַלֹּא פֵּרֵשׁ רַשִׁ"י עַל פָּסוּק "אֲשֶׁר־יֹאמַר לָכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ" שֶׁכָּפָה אוֹתָם לָמוּל, וְאִם כֵּן כָּל הַמִּצְרִיִּים נִימּוֹלִים הָיוּ, וְשֶׁמָּא אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁיֵּשׁ לוֹ הַמִּילָה הוּא אִישׁ מִצְרִי וְלֹא יוֹסֵף וּמַה סִּימָן הוּא זֶה. אֲבָל יֵשׁ לְדַקְדֵּק מָה הָיְתָה כַּוָּנַת יוֹסֵף לָמוּל אוֹתָם מַאי שְׁנָא מִצְוָה זוֹ מִשְּׁאַר הַמִּצְוֹת, וּכְמוֹ שֶׁהִקְשׁוּ הַמְּפָרְשִׁים לְפִי פְּשׁוּטוֹ שֶׁל מִקְרָא הֲגַם שֶׁיֵּשׁ בְּזֶה סוֹד. וְעוֹד יֵשׁ לְדַקְדֵּק בְּמַה שֶׁכָּתַב רַשִׁ"י עַל פָּסוּק "אֲשֶׁר־יֹאמַר לָכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ", הֲרֵי גָּזַר עַל הַתְּבוּאָה וְהִרְקִיבָה מָה אִם יִגְזוֹר עָלֵינוּ וְנָמוּת, דְּמַה גְּזֵירָה שַׁיָּיךְ שֶׁיָּמוּתוּ הֲלֹא אִם לֹא יִתֵּן לָהֶם אוֹכֶל יָמוּתוּ בְּלֹא גְּזֵירָה.

The commentators[3] **ask how they recognized in this way that he was Joseph, for didn't Rashi interpret on the verse, "**Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, 'Go to Joseph; **whatever he tells you, you shall do,' "**[4] **that he had commanded them to be circumcised?**[5] **If so, then all of the Egyptians were circumcised, and perhaps even though he was circumcised, he was an Egyptian man and not Joseph. What sign was this? But we need to check what Joseph's intention was to circumcise them, how this mitzvah was different from the other mitzvot**, that he only commanded them this one**. The commentators questioned this, in light of the plain meaning of the Scripture, for there is also an esoteric secret in this.**[6]

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[1] Gen. 45:4.

[2] Rashi to Gen. 45:4, based on Gen. Rabbah 93:10.

[3] Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah ("Chizkuni"), *Commentary on the Torah* (composed France, c. 1220–1260).

[4] Gen. 41:55.

[5] Rashi to Gen. 41:55, based on Gen. Rabbah 91:5.

[6] Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague ("Maharal"), *Gur Aryeh* (composed c.1548–c.1578), Gen. 41:55: Joseph saw that the Egyptians' grain was spoiling, while his was not. He attributed this to the fact that they were uncircumcised, as the Covenant of Circumcision has a sustaining quality.

We also need to check what Rashi wrote on the verse, "whatever he tells you, you shall do," that Pharaoh told the people that Joseph had interpreted his dream that there would be seven lean years, and they responded, "we gathered in much grain, but it has rotted." Pharaoh responded "**if he issued a decree on the grain and it rotted; what if he should decree upon us that we die?** Thus, do whatever he asks of you."[7] **How is a decree relevant that they should die? For if he wouldn't give them food, they would die without any decree?**

וְהַכֹּל יִתּוֹרֵץ בְּקוּשְׁיָא אַחֶרֶת, דְּאֵיךְ אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁיּוֹסֵף יַכְרִיחֵם לָמוּל וְהַלֹּא עֲדַיִן הָיוּ מִצְרִיִּים וְאֵין הַמִּילָה הָזוֹ לְשֵׁם גֵּירוּת, וְהָיָה אִיסּוּר בְּזֶה כִּדְאִיתָא בְּשֻׁלְחָן עָרוּךְ יוֹרֶה דֵּעָה (סִימָן רס"ג) דְּאָסוּר לָמוּל הַנָּכְרִי שֶׁלֹּא לְשֵׁם גֵּירוּת. וּבִגְמָרָא דַּעֲבוֹדָה זָרָה נָמֵי אִיתָא שֶׁבַּחִנָּם אֵין מְרַפְּאִים אוֹתָם, וְלָמוּל אוֹתָם בִּשְׁבִיל מוּרְנָא דְּהַיְינוּ תּוֹלַעַת שֶׁמַּכְאִיב לוֹ בְּאוֹתוֹ מָקוֹם אָסוּר. וּמִכֹּל שֶׁכֵּן לַטַּעַם שֶׁכָּתַב הַטַּ"ז שָׁם שֶׁכֵּיוָן שֶׁאַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ עוֹמֵד וּמַבְחִין מִי הוּא שֶׁנִּימּוֹל וְאֵינוֹ מַנִּיחוֹ לִגְהִינָם, מִי שֶׁמָּל אֶת הַנָּכְרִי מְבַטֵּל סִימָן זֶה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל עכ"ל.

All of this can be explained with another question: How is it possible that Joseph would force them to undergo circumcision? Weren't they still Egyptians, and this circumcision was not for the sake of conversion? There was a prohibition on this, as it says in the *Shulchan Aruch* (Yoreh De'ah, siman 263, se'if 5**), that it is forbidden to circumcise a non-Jew unless it is for the sake of conversion. In the Gemara of** tractate **Avodah Zarah** (26a)**,**[8] **it is written that they cannot be healed for free, and it is forbidden to circumcise them for the purpose of** removing a ***murna*, which is a worm that causes pain in that area. Certainly, the reason that the *Taz* writes there that since our forefather Abraham is standing and discerning who is circumcised so as not to allow the one who is circumcised to enter Gehenna, so one who circumcises a non-Jew nullifies this sign of Israel.**[9]

וְצָרִיךְ לוֹמַר כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתַב הַיְּפֵה תֹּאַר, שֶׁהָיָה יוֹסֵף לִשְׁמָצָה בְּעֵינֵיהֶם לִהְיוֹת הוּא וּבָנָיו נִימּוֹלִים, כִּי כֵן דֶּרֶךְ הָעֲרֵלִים שֶׁהֵם מְבַזִּים אֶת הַנִּימּוֹלִים וּמְאוּסִים בְּעֵינֵיהֶם, וְלָכֵן כְּפָאָן שֶׁיִּהְיוּ גַּם הֵם נִימּוֹלִים עכ"ל. וְהוֹאִיל שֶׁלֹּא עָשָׂה זֶה אֶלָּא מִפְּנֵי הַחֶרְפָּה שֶׁהָיוּ עוֹשִׂים, לֹא דַּק בָּהֶם שֶׁתִּהְיֶה הַמִּילָה כְּתִיקוּנָהּ, רַק שֶׁיַּחְתְּכוּ הַבָּשָׂר, וּבְוַדַּאי שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ נִזְהָרִים בִּפְרִיעָה אוֹ בְּצִיצִין הַמְעַכְּבִין אֶת הַמִּילָה, וְהָאִיסּוּר לָמוּל אֶת הַנָּכְרִי הָיְינוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת מִילָה כְּתִיקוּנָהּ מִטַּעַם הַטַּ"ז הַנַ"ל.

It must be said, as the *Yefeh To'ar* wrote, that Joseph was considered disgraceful in their eyes for being circumcised, and for his sons being circumcised as well. This is because the uncircumcised people hold the circumcised in contempt and find them repulsive. Therefore, he forced them to be circumcised as well, in order to shame them.

Since he only did this out of the shame they were causing, he did not do a proper circumcision, rather just cut the flesh. Certainly, they weren't careful about *priah*, the uncovering of the corona, **or the *tzitzin***, shreds of flesh from the foreskin, **which are essential for** a proper **circumcision. The prohibition against circumcising a non-Jew applies specifically to performing a circumcision according to the proper procedure, as explained by the *Taz* above.**

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[7] Ibid.
[8] See also Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 158:1.
[9] David ha-Levi Segal (c. 1586–1667), *Turei Zahav* ("Taz") on Shulchan Aruch,Yoreh De'ah 158:3.

וְאַף עַל גַּב דְּלֹא נִיתְּנָה פְּרִיעַת הַמִּילָה לְאַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ, כְּבַר כָּתְבוּ הַתּוֹסָפוֹת בְּפֶרֶק הֶעָרֵל שֶׁאַבְרָהָם מָל וּפָרַע אֶת עַצְמוֹ שֶׁהֲרֵי קִיֵּים אֶת כָּל הַתּוֹרָה וְכֵן קִיְּימוּ בָּנָיו אַחֲרָיו. וּמִכָּל שֶׁכֵּן יוֹסֵף שֶׁנּוֹלַד מָהוּל, וְהֶרְאָה לְאָחָיו אֵת הַמִּילָה כְּדֵי שֶׁיַּכִּירוּ בְּוַדַּאי שֶׁהוּא יוֹסֵף, שֶׁאִם הָיָה מִצְרִי לֹא הָיָה לוֹ מִילָה כְּשֵׁרָה עִם הַפְּרִיעָה.

Even though the commandment to perform ***priah*** **with circumcision was not given to our forefather Abraham, the Tosafot already wrote in the** 8th **chapter** of tractate Yevamot, **entitled "the Uncircumcised"** (70a)**, that Abraham circumcised himself and performed *priah*, as he fulfilled the entire Torah** even before it was given,[10] **and so too did his sons after him.**

Even more so, Joseph, who was born circumcised,[11] **showed his brothers the circumcision so that they would surely recognize that he was Joseph, for if he had been an Egyptian, he would not have had a kosher circumcision with the *priah*.**

וְעוֹד יֵשׁ לוֹמַר שֶׁיּוֹסֵף הֶרְאָה לְאָחָיו שֶׁהוּא מָהוּל דְּמִמָּה נַפְשָׁךְ בְּסִימָן זֶה יֵשׁ לָהֶם לְהַכִּיר הָאֱמֶת שֶׁהוּא יוֹסֵף, שֶׁאִם אֵינָם יוֹדְעִים הָעִנְיָן שֶׁהַמִּצְרִיִּים מָלוּ אֶת עַצְמָם, פְּשִׁיטָא שֶׁיַּכִּירוּ שֶׁהוּא יוֹסֵף שֶׁהֲרֵי הוּא נִימּוֹל כְּמוֹ הֵם. וְאַף אִם הֵם יוֹדְעִים עִנְיָן מִילַת הַמִּצְרִיִּים, יִהְיוּ יוֹדְעִים נָמֵי שֶׁיּוֹסֵף שֶׁהָיָה הַמַּשְׁבִּיר לְכָל עַם הָאָרֶץ כָּפָה אוֹתָם לָמוּל כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּהְיוּ כְּמוֹתוֹ, אִם כֵּן הוּא הָיָה נִימּוֹל כְּבָר וְאֵיךְ נִימּוֹל אִם הָיָה מִצְרִי. אֶלָּא וַדַּאי צָרִיךְ לוֹמַר שֶׁהוּא יוֹסֵף דְּאִי לָאו הָכִי מִי הִכְרִיחוּ לָמוּל אֶת עַצְמוֹ אִם הָיָה הוּא הַשַּׁלִּיט בְּמִצְרַיִם, וְלָכֵן הֶרְאָה לָהֶם שֶׁהוּא מָהוּל דְּמִמָּה נַפְשָׁךְ הוּא סִימָן מוּבְהָק.

Additionally, one can say that Joseph showed his brothers that he was circumcised, for whichever way you look at it, by this sign they can recognize the truth, that he is Joseph. For if they did not know that the Egyptians circumcised themselves, it is obvious that they would recognize that he is Joseph, since he is circumcised like them. Even if they did know that the Egyptians circumcised themselves, they will still realize that Joseph, who was the one providing for all the people, forced them to be circumcised so they would be like him. Therefore, he was already circumcised. But how could he be circumcised if he was an Egyptian? Rather, it certainly must be said that he was Joseph, for if not so, who forced him to circumcise himself if he was the vizier in Egypt? Therefore, he showed them that he was circumcised, for whichever way you look at it, this was a clear sign.

וּמַה שֶׁהִכְרִיחָם לָמוּל וְקָשֶׁה כנ"ל, יֵשׁ לוֹמַר שֶׁאֵין הָכִי נָמֵי שֶׁמַּה שֶׁנֶּאֱסַר לָנוּ לָמוּל אֶת הַגּוֹי הָיֵינוּ מִטַּעַם שֶׁכָּתַב הַטַּ"ז שֶׁהוֹאִיל שֶׁאַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ ע"ה מַבְחִין מִי שֶׁהוּא נִימּוֹל מִי שֶׁמָּל אֶת הַנָּכְרִי מְבַטֵּל סִימָן זֶה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל. וְהָכָא שָׁאנֵי, וְאַדְרַבָּא מִטַּעַם זֶה מַמָּשׁ כְּפָאן לָמוּל. שֶׁהֲרֵי מֵעִנְיָן מְכִירָתוֹ הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ יוֹסֵף שֶׁהָיְתָה סִבָּה מֵאֵת הקב"ה שֶׁיֵּרְדוּ לְמִצְרַיִם וְיִשְׁתַּעְבְּדוּ שָׁם. וְעִקַּר הַגְּלוּת הָיָה לְפִי שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל בַּטְּלוּ הַמִּילָה בְּמִצְרַיִם, כִּדְאִיתָא בְּשְׁמוֹת רַבָּה עַל פָּסוּק "וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ־חָדָשׁ עַל־מִצְרָיִם", כְּשֶׁמֵּת יוֹסֵף הֵפֵרוּ בְּרִית מִילָה מִיָּד הָפַךְ הקב"ה אַהֲבָה שֶׁהָיוּ הַמִּצְרִיִּים אוֹהֲבִים אוֹתָם לַשִּׂנְאָה כְּדִכְתִיב "הָפַךְ לִבָּם לִשְׂנֹא עַמּוֹ" וְכוּ' וְעיי"ש.

As for his forcing them to circumcise themselves, with the difficulty as mentioned above, one can say that it's indeed so that what is forbidden to us, to circumcise a non-Jew,

[10] Yoma 28b.
[11] Gen Rabbah 84:6..

is because of the reason that the *Taz* wrote, that since our forefather Abraham, peace be upon him, can distinguish who is circumcised, one who circumcises a non-Jew nullifies this sign for Israel.

But here it is different. On the contrary, for this very reason, Joseph forced them to circumcise themselves. For, regarding his sale, Joseph knew that it was part of the plan of the Holy One, Blessed be he, for them to descend to Egypt and be enslaved there. The main cause of the exile was because Israel abandoned circumcision in Egypt, as it is written in *Shemot Rabbah* (1:8) **on the verse "A new king arose over Egypt"[12]—when Joseph died, they abandoned the covenant of circumcision. Immediately, the Holy One, Blessed be He, turned their love for the Israelites into hatred, as it is written, "He changed their hearts to hate His people**, to plot against His servants,**"[13] and see there.**

וּלְפִי זֶה אוֹתָם שֶׁנּוֹלְדוּ וּמֵתוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא הָיָה אֶפְשָׁר לְאַבְרָהָם לְהַבְחִין אוֹתָם לְפִי שֶׁהָיוּ עֲרֵלִים. וְלָכֵן נִתְחַכֵּם יוֹסֵף לָמוּל אֶת הַמִּצְרִיִּים כְּדֵי לְבַטֵּל סִימָן זֶה מִן הַדּוֹר הַהוּא, כְּדֵי שֶׁאַבְרָהָם לֹא יַבִּיט בַּדּוֹר הַהוּא בְּסִימָן הַמִּילָה, אֶלָּא יַצִּיל מִן הַגֵּהִינֹּם כָּל מִי שֶׁהוּא מִזֶּרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל סְתָם אוֹ כָּל מִי שֶׁסָּבַל הַגָּלוּת בְּמִצְרַיִם.

According to this, those who were born and died in Egypt could not be distinguished by Abraham, because they were uncircumcised. Therefore, Joseph devised a plan to circumcise the Egyptians in order to remove this sign from that generation, so that Abraham would not look at that generation and see the sign of circumcision. Instead, he would save from Gehenna anyone who was from Jewish descent, or anyone who suffered during the Egyptian exile.

וּפֵירוּשׁ מַה שֶׁאָמַר פַּרְעֹה, מָה אִם יִגְזוֹר עָלֵינוּ וְנָמוּת, הָיֵינוּ שֶׁהַמִּצְרִיִּים הָלְכוּ אֵצֶל פַּרְעֹה לְקַבּוּל עַל יוֹסֵף כְּדֵי שֶׁפַּרְעֹה שֶׁהוּא הַמֶּלֶךְ יָכוֹף אֵת יוֹסֵף לִיתֵּן לָהֶם הָאוֹכֶל, וּפַרְעֹה הֵשִׁיב אַף אִם אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה כֵן מִכָּל מָקוֹם הוֹאִיל שֶׁגָּזַר עַל הַתְּבוּאָה וְהִרְקִיבָה כָּךְ יָכוֹל לִגְזוֹר שֶׁיָּבוֹאוּ עָלֵינוּ חֳלָאִים וְנָמוּת.

The explanation of what Pharaoh said, "What if he decrees upon us and we die," is that the Egyptians went to Pharaoh to complain about Joseph, so that Pharaoh, being the king, would force Joseph to give them food. Pharaoh responded that even if he were to do that, since Joseph had already decreed that the grain would spoil, he could also decree that diseases would come upon them and they would die.

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[12] Ex. 1:8.
[13] Ps. 105:25.