

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Tazria 5768

And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised (12:3)

At every bris milah, the mohel recites, "Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon Hakohein, turned away my anger from the children of Israel when he acted out My anger in their midst, and so I did not destroy the children of Israel in My anger...Eliyahu, angel of the bris, here is yours; stand on my right hand and support me." What is the connection between Pinchas, renamed Eliyahu, and bris milah? Why is he called "the angel of the bris"? True, Hashem did promise Pinchas a covenant of peace, but nowhere does it say that this refers to the covenant of circumcision. If any person in the Torah is to be connected with the mitzvah of bris milah, it should be Avraham Avinu, who was the first to perform this mitzvah.

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabba 48:8) says that Avraham Avinu will sit by the door to Gehinom and not let any Jew enter, unless he is uncircumcised. The Gemara (Eirubin 19a) says that Avraham will not let any Jew into Gehinom unless he married a gentile woman. What is special about these two virtues – being circumcised and not marrying a gentile – that they have the power to spare a Jew from Gehinom?

The Meshech Chochmah on Bereishis 15:18 answers this question based on the Midrash in Bereishis Rabba 44:21: Hashem showed Avraham four things: Gehinom, the exiles, the giving of the Torah and the Temple. He said to him, "As long as your descendents are busy with the last two, they will be spared the first two. But if they leave the last two, they will get the first two. [Since the Temple will one day be destroyed, they will have to get one of the punishments.] Which punishment do you choose for them?" Rabbi Chanina bar Papa said: Avraham chose the exiles. Rabbi Yudan, Rabbi Idi and Rabbi Chama bar Chanina said: Avraham chose Gehinom, but Hashem chose for him the exiles...Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Acha: Avraham was sitting and thinking all that day: "What should I choose, Gehinom or exile?" Said the Holy One, blessed is He, to him, "Avraham! Throw away that coin [of Gehinom]!"

The Midrash on Eichah 1:3 says: Why does Scripture speak so much about the exile of the Jewish people? Aren't there many nations who were exiled from their lands? The Midrash answers: when gentiles go into exile, they assimilate into their new country. They eat the same foods, drink the same drinks and eventually intermarry with the population of the new country. Thus they are not really in exile anymore; they are full-fledged members of their new country's culture. But Jews go into exile and remain separate from the culture around them, not eating with the gentiles or intermarrying; thus their exile continues for generation after generation.

Avraham has the power to spare a Jew from Gehinom because of the deal he made with G-d, that his descendants would go into exile instead of Gehinom. But there is one gap in Avraham's power: if a Jew has assimilated to the point where he marries a gentile or is not circumcised, Avraham cannot save him, because such a Jew chose not to truly experience exile, and by default he has opted for the only other alternative: Gehinom.

Based on these words of the Meshech Chochmah, we can understand the crucial role of Pinchas. Pinchas saw a Jew about to marry a gentile woman, and took zealous action. Through his zeal, that Jew was privileged to die as a Jew. The

Torah says (Bamidbar 25:14), "And the name of the Israelite man who was smitten..." He died with the distinction of being called "an Israelite man". Thus Pinchas, with his zeal in fighting assimilation, closed the gap in Avraham's power. Thanks to Pinchas and those like him, every Jew can be saved from Gehinom. This is why he, under his new name Eliyahu Hanavi, was chosen to be the "angel of the bris."

In times past, assimilation was the main threat to Avraham's covenant, which substituted exile for Gehinom. But now we face a different threat to that same covenant: Zionism. By bringing a premature end to the exile, Zionism undermines Avraham's power to spare every Jew from Gehinom. We are in danger of seeing the fulfillment of Rabbeinu Gershom's prophetic words, in his commentary to Tamid 32a: "The Satan triumphs! He confuses them and gives them a redemption, and in the end he will bring them down to Gehinom!" He means that those who partake in the Satan's false redemption will end up in Gehinom, because they will not experience the exile planned by Avraham Avinu as its substitute. Let us emulate Pinchas by acting zealously to close this gap and bring every Jew into the covenant of Avraham.

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