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Brit Milah: Entering the Covenant

Rabbi Tali Adler





COURSE INTRODUCTION

One of the most enduring and distinctive rituals in Jewish life is *brit milah*, the covenant of circumcision. For thousands of years, Jews have welcomed baby boys into the covenant between God and the Jewish people through this act, marking the body itself as part of a relationship that stretches back to Avraham and Sarah.

At first glance, *brit milah* might seem like a single ritual moment that falls into the category of “it’s just what we do because we always have.” In fact, it’s so essential to our tradition, it can often be overlooked altogether. But *brit milah* is much more than a ritual, and exploring it can reveal profound truths about what it means to belong to a covenant and the values that shape Jewish life.

In this course, we ask: Why does the covenant between God and the Jewish people take the form of a mark on the body? What does it mean to enter a covenant before one is old enough to choose it? How can a ritual performed in infancy shape a person’s sense of identity, belonging, and responsibility? We will explore *brit milah* through classical Jewish texts and commentaries. Along the way, we’ll encounter a range of ideas about what this ritual represents.

For many Jews today, *brit milah* also raises questions. Many of us live in cultures that emphasize individual autonomy and choice, and the idea that a child enters a covenant before they can consciously affirm it can feel unfamiliar or challenging. Rather than trying to resolve those tensions, this course invites us to explore them together through the voices of Jewish tradition.

It is also important to name that *brit milah* is a ritual performed on Jewish baby boys (and on men converting to Judaism). At least since the medieval period, Jewish communities also developed different ways of welcoming baby girls into the covenant. While our focus here will be on the texts and ideas surrounding *brit milah*, I hope this learning will open up broader reflections about belonging, ritual, and covenant.

My hope is that studying these texts together will deepen our understanding of this ancient practice and help us think more carefully about what it means to enter our children into the covenant.

- Rav Tali

HAVRUTA STUDY ROUTINE:

This course invites you to study Jewish texts with a *havruta*—listening closely to the texts, your *havruta*, and your own emerging ideas. To get the most out of your time together, it can be helpful to have a sequence or routine to follow every time you sit down to learn. We suggest the following routine for your learning sessions.

1. Begin with a few minutes of personal check-in. If its your first session, take time to get to know each other as people and as learners. Feel free to use this [“Havruta Warmup”](#) (linked) created by Hadar's Pedagogy of Partnership program.
2. Watch the short instructor video (before or during your session).
3. Read through the study sheet aloud together, pausing to reflect, explore questions, or clarify what the texts are saying.
4. Use the discussion questions to deepen your learning—but follow your curiosity, and don't feel the need to answer everything.
5. Move at your own pace; it's fine to spend more than one session on a study sheet.
6. Have a question for the wider Zug community? Post it on the Course Forum.





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SESSION 1 To Whom Do I Belong? God and People (Part I)

INTRODUCTION TO SESSION 1

All Jews are blessed to belong to a covenant established between God and our ancestors. We participate in this covenant, acting out the agreements made between God and the Patriarchs, Matriarchs, and their descendants, by living lives in accordance with God's instructions (Torah). And we are privileged, in turn, to belong to a collective with shared values and to enjoy God's everlasting love for us.

Interestingly, our tradition chooses to mark our belonging to this covenant on the bodies of Jewish boys and men, and we enter them into the covenant through the ritual of *brit milah*, circumcision. This is curious because this mark is intimate and personal, marked on the flesh itself, and it's made on an infant, someone who has no capacity to choose or opt into the covenant. This opens fundamental questions about identity, embodiment, and what it means to belong to something larger than oneself.

In this session, we'll explore: Why does Judaism insist that the relationship between a Jew and God should leave a mark on the flesh? What does it mean to carry the covenant on your body, and what kind of person does that shape you into? Is this covenant unilateral—received from on high or is it a mutual covenant, a relational bond? And what kind of meaning can be made from a commitment entered before we're old enough to choose it?

I. THE FOUNDATION: GOD ESTABLISHES THE COVENANT

This is the foundational biblical text for *brit milah*. God appears to Avram at age 99, and establishes an “everlasting covenant” that includes a name change (to Avraham), the promise of descendants and land, and the physical sign of circumcision. As you read this text, pay close attention to what information the text gives you and what information seems to be missing. Also notice: are there any words or phrases that repeat? Why might this be?

SOURCE #1

בראשית יז:א-יד

¹וַיְהִי אַבְרָם בֶּן תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה וַתִּשַׁע שָׁנִים
וַיֵּרָא ה' אֶל אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי אֱ-לֹ-הֵי
הַתְּהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי וְהָיָה תָמִים: ²וְאֶתְנַהּ בְּרִיתִי בֵינִי
וּבֵינֶךָ וְאֶרְבָּה אוֹתְךָ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד:

Genesis 17:1-14

¹When Avram was 99 years old, God appeared to Avram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. ²I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.”

3 וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָם עַל פָּנָיו וַיִּדְבֹר אֶת־
 אֱלֹקִים לְאָמֹר: 4 אֲנִי הִנֵּה בְרִיתִי
 אִתְּךָ וְהָיִיתָ לְאָב הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם: 5 וְלֹא
 יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָם וְהָיָה
 שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָהָם כִּי אָב הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם
 נִתְּתִיךָ: 6 וְהִפְרֹתִי אִתְּךָ בְּמֵאֹד
 מְאֹד וְנִתְּתִיךָ לְגוֹיִם וּמְלָכִים מִמֶּךָ
 יֵצְאוּ: 7 וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי
 וּבֵינֶךָ וּבֵין וְרֵעֶךָ אַחֲרָיִךָ לְדֹרֹתֶם
 לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לְאֱלֹקִים
 וְלִזְרַעֲךָ אַחֲרָיִךָ: 8 וְנָתַתִּי לְךָ
 וְלִזְרַעֲךָ אַחֲרָיִךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיֶּךָ
 אֶת כָּל אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן לְאֶחְזָת עוֹלָם
 וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לְאֱלֹקִים:

9 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם
 וְאָתָּה אֶת בְּרִיתִי תִשְׁמֹר אִתְּךָ
 וְרֵעֶךָ אַחֲרָיִךָ לְדֹרֹתֶם: 10 זֹאת
 בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְרוּ בֵּינִי
 וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין וְרֵעֶךָ אַחֲרָיִךָ הַמּוֹל
 לְכֶם כָּל זָכָר: 11 וְנִמְלֹתֶם אֶת בְּשַׁר
 עֶרְלַתְכֶם וְהָיָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית בֵּינִי
 וּבֵינֵיכֶם: 12 וּבֶן שְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים יִמּוֹל
 לְכֶם כָּל זָכָר לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם יְלִיד בַּיִת
 וּמִקְנֵת כֶּסֶף מִכּוֹל בֶּן נָכָר אֲשֶׁר
 לֹא מִזְרַעְךָ הוּא: 13 הַמּוֹל יִמּוֹל
 יְלִיד בֵּיתְךָ וּמִקְנֵת כֶּסֶף וְהָיָה
 בְּרִיתִי בְּבִשְׂרְכֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם:
 14 וְעָרְלוּ זָכָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִמּוֹל אֶת
 בְּשַׁר עֶרְלָתוֹ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ
 הַהוּא מֵעַמִּיָּה אֶת בְּרִיתִי הַפֶּה:

3 Avram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, 4 “As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 And you shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham, for I make you the father (*av*) of a multitude (*hamon*) of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. 7 I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. 8 I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God.”

9 God further said to Avraham, “As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. 10 Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. 12 And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, 13 they must be circumcised, homeborn and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. 14 And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from kin; he has broken My covenant.”

Discuss with your *havruta*:

1. The phrase “between Me and you” (or “between Me and them”) appears repeatedly in these verses, suggesting a mutual relationship, not a command from on high. What do you think are the values behind creating this kind of relational covenant? What kind of relationship does this language suggest? How is

◆ **Radak**

R. David Kimḥi, a biblical commentator and grammarian from 13th century Provence.

a covenant “between” two parties different from a commandment given from above?

2. The Torah doesn’t explain why circumcision happens on the eighth day of life. Let’s speculate! Why might the Torah specify that circumcision should happen on the eighth day? What might be significant about performing this *mitzvah* when a baby is so young, before they can understand or give consent? How does this compare to Avraham’s experience doing it as an adult?
3. God could have chosen any number of signs for this covenant—a particular garment, a ritual, a verbal declaration—and the Torah does not explain why the choice was circumcision. Why do you think God chose something permanent in the flesh?
4. Based on this passage, what do you think is a parent’s role when they arrange for their son’s *brit milah*? Are they acting on behalf of the child, on behalf of God, on behalf of the Jewish people? Or all of the above? Point to specific passages as evidence for your suggestion. And also consider: what kind of an experience does each create and how might they be different from each other?
5. What other questions do you have about this text? Share them with your *havruta*.

II. A PHYSICAL SIGN

The Radak offers one explanation for why the *brit* should be a physical mark on the body. Before jumping to the discussion questions, try to articulate what new ideas the Radak is bringing about *brit milah*.

SOURCE #2 ס

<p>בראשית יז:א-יד</p> <p>רצה בו האל להיות לו לאות בינו ובין האל להיות זרע אברהם המכוון עם מיוחד ויהיו בבשרו אות מיוחד...ובזה תהיה שלם.</p>	<p>Radak◆ on Bereishit 17:1</p> <p>God wanted it to be a sign for Avraham between him and God, that the descendants of Avraham would be recognizable as a unique people, and that it would be a unique sign in their flesh.... And through this, Avraham would be complete.</p>
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Discuss with your *havruta*:

1. Radak emphasizes that circumcision makes Avraham’s descendants “recognizable” as unique. But circumcision is also a private mark, not publicly visible. How might you reconcile these two aspects? What is the value of having a mark for oneself, and the value of having a mark that others can recognize?
2. Most of us think of faith as something internal—beliefs, feelings, commitments of the heart. What might change when faith is inscribed on the body?

◆ **Talmud Bavli**

The Babylonian Talmud or Talmud Bavli is the masterpiece of ancient Babylonian Jewry. It is built upon the Mishnah (but frequently digresses), and quotes many earlier sources. The work is mostly finished in the 6th century CE. This section discusses *tefillin*, the boxes on the arm and head, containing scriptural passages and worn, in talmudic times, all day for divine protection.

◆ **Our Rabbis taught**

A talmudic formula that introduces an earlier text.

Psalm 12 opens with a cryptic superscript, probably a musical direction that we no longer understand: "... on the *sheminit*... of David." The Talmud takes this to be *sheminit*, meaning "eighth" (related to *shemoneh* = eight). With this textual hook, the following talmudic passage suggests that David, also mentioned in the psalm's superscription, wrote that psalm about his *brit milah*.


SOURCE #3 


תלמוד בבלי מנחות דף מג:

ת"ר חביבין ישראל
שסיבבן הקב"ה במצות:
תפילין בראשיהן ותפילין
בזרועותיהן, וציצית
בבגדיהן ומזוזה לפתחיהן;
ועליהן אמר דוד (תהלים
ק"ט, קס"ד) "שבע ביום
הללתיך על משפטי
צדקך".

ובשעה שנכנס דוד לבית
המרחץ וראה עצמו
עומד ערום, אמר "אוי
לי שאעמוד ערום בלא
מצוה". וכיון שנוכר במילה
שבבשרו, נתיישבה דעתו.
לאחר שיצא, אמר עליה
שירה, שנאמר (תהלים יב,
א) "למנצח על השמינית,
מזמור לדוד" - על מילה
שניתנה בשמיני.

Talmud Bavli ◆ **Menahot 43b**

Our Rabbis taught: The Jewish people are beloved, as the Holy Blessed One surrounded them with *mitzvot*. They have *tefillin* on their heads, and *tefillin* on their arms, and fringes (*tzitzit*) on their garments, and a *mezuzah* for their doorways. Concerning them, David said: "Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous ordinances" (Tehillim 119:164 .

And when David entered the bathhouse and saw himself standing naked, he said, "Woe to me that I stand naked without any *mitzvot*!" But once he remembered the circumcision that was in his flesh, his mind was put at ease. After he left, he recited a song, as it is stated: "For the leader, on the *sheminit*, a song of David" (Tehillim 12:1 )—on the circumcision, which was given on the eighth day.

Discuss with your *havruta*:

1. What are your first impressions from this talmudic passage?
2. Here *brit milah* is compared to *tefillin* and *tzitzit*. What might this comparison reveal about the purpose (or one purpose) of *brit milah*?

questions continue....

3. Why do you think David first feels sadness, but then feels relief in this story? Do you relate to his feelings here? Why or why not?

As a result of his experience, David is said to have recited Tehillim 12. Read this psalm now in its entirety. As you read, try to identify the problem David is praying about and what he's asking for from God.

SOURCE #4 

תהילים יב	Tehillim 12
1לְמַנְצֵחַ עַל הַשְּׁמִינִית מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:	1For the leader; on the <i>sheminit</i> , a song of David.
2הוֹשִׁיעָה ה' בִּי גַּמְר חָסִיד	2Help, God! For the faithful are no more;
בִּי פָסוּ אַמּוּנִים מִבְּנֵי אָדָם:	the loyal have vanished from among mortals.
3שָׁוְא יִדְבְּרוּ אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ	3People speak lies to one another;
שִׁפְתַי חֲלָקוֹת בְּלִב וְלִב יִדְבְּרוּ:	their speech is smooth; they talk with duplicity.
4יִכְרַת ה' כָּל שִׁפְתֵי חֲלָקוֹת	4May God cut off all flattering lips,
לְשׁוֹן מְדַבֶּרֶת גְּדִלוֹת:	every tongue that speaks arrogance.
5אֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ לְלִשְׁנֵנוּ נִגְבִּיר	5They say, "By our tongues we shall prevail;
שִׁפְתֵינוּ אֲתָנוּ מִי אֲדוֹן לָנוּ:	with lips such as ours, who can be our master?"
6מִשֹּׁד עַנְיִים מֵאֲנָקַת אֲבִיּוֹנִים	6"Because of the groans of the plundered poor
עֲתָה אֶקוּם יֹאמֵר ה'	and needy, I will now act," says God.
אֲשִׁית בְּיִשְׁע יָפִיחַ לוֹ:	"I will give help," [God] affirms to them.
7אֲמֵרוֹת ה' אֲמֵרוֹת טְהוֹרוֹת	7God's words are pure words,
כֶּסֶף צָרוּף בְּעִלְיִל לְאָרֶץ	silver purified in an earthen crucible,
מִזְקָק שִׁבְעַתַּיִם:	refined sevenfold.
8אֲתָה ה' תִּשְׁמְרֵם	8You, God, will keep them,
תִּצְרְנוּ מִן הַדּוֹר זֶה לְעוֹלָם:	guarding each from this age evermore.
9סָבִיב רָשָׁעִים יִתְהַלְכוּן	9On every side the wicked roam
כִּרְם זֵלוֹת לְבְנֵי אָדָם:	when baseness is exalted among mortals.

Discuss with your *havruta*:

1. David mourns evil that has arisen among people and is vexed by peoples' lies and arrogance. He wants these people to be punished and the faithful to be protected by God. Why might David have been moved to recite such a psalm upon remembering his circumcision?

questions continue....

2. David is particularly agonized by the speech of those who lie and prays that their very lips and tongues be removed as punishment. How does evil talk fit into David's prayer that righteous, faithful, poor people be protected and uplifted, and why might the physical mark of commitment to God on his body act as a kind of counter-testimony?
3. These evildoers claim that their tongues will give them power. Where should power belong, according to David?

◆ **Take a Step Back** ◆

1. This session explored the idea that covenant is something we inherit before we can choose it. How do you personally relate to belonging to a tradition, community, or set of commitments that existed before you? Does that feel meaningful, challenging, comforting—or something else?
2. Several of the texts here suggest that Jewish commitment is not only expressed through thought or belief, but through the body and through action. What do you think is gained when Jewish observance is embodied in physical practices?
3. After studying these texts, has anything shifted in how you think about *brit*—covenant, belonging, the relationship between Jews and God? What questions or curiosities are you carrying forward into the rest of the course?