



From the desk of
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Office of the Rabbinate of Elad, Rosh HaAyin and Herzelia

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TORAT

Parashat Tazria

HAMELECH

Man's Mission

In the beginning of *Parashat Tazria*, the Torah tells us the mitzvah of *brit mila*. The Medrash relates the following conversation [Midrash Tanchumah Tazria 5]: The wicked Turnusrufus asked Rabbi Akiva, "Whose handiwork is more pleasing, that of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* or that of man? [Rebbi Akiva answered,] "The handiwork of man." Asked Turnusrufus, "Can man make anything similar to the Heavens and earth?" Said Rabbi Akiva, "Do not speak to me about things that are above the creations, things over which man has no control. Rather, speak about things that are found amongst man."

"Why are you circumcised?" asked Turnusrufus. "I knew that this is what you were asking me." answered Rabbi Akiva. "This is why I first said that the handiwork of man is more pleasing than *Hakadosh Baruch Hu's*." Rabbi Akiva brought stalks as well as loaves of bread. He then said, "These are the handiwork of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, and these are the handiwork of man. Are these [loaves] not nicer than these stalks?" Responded Turnusrufus, "If He desires circumcision, then why did He not create man circumcised?" Answered Rabbi Akiva, "It is because Hashem gave man mitzvot in order to purge him."

We also find our Sages speaking about the creation of man [Vayikra Rabbah Tazria 14:1]: "If man merits, he is told, 'You preceded all of creation.' If he does not, he is told, 'A mosquito preceded you ... Said R' Simlai: Just as man's creation follows animals, beasts, and birds, so too, does his Torah follow that of animals, beasts, and birds."

Questions:

1. How do we understand the debate between Rabbi Akiva and Turnusrufus pertaining to the creation and the mitzvot of the Torah?
2. *Masechet Brachot* [6b] and *Masechet Shabbat* [30a] seem to totally contradict the second statement of our Sages. There it states that *man* is the most superior of all creations! The gemara, expounding on the *pasuk* in *Kohelet* [perek 12], states: Said Rabbi Elazar, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* said, 'The whole world was only created for this [i.e., man].'"
3. The *Maharal* asks in his *Shabbat Hagadol derashah*: How can it be said that the mosquito is truly more praiseworthy than man, and because of the mosquito's significance it was created before man [see *Be'er Ha'golah*, the end of *be'er* 5]?

Man's Purpose in This World

When a couple gets married and sets out to build their home, they must establish for themselves ambitions and goals. They must think about the fundamental question: why were we created?

It is this which the debate between Rabbi Akiva and Turnusrufus revolved around. Turnusrufus's view was that Hashem created a perfect world in which there is nothing for man to change. After all, the Torah states [Bereishit 1:31], "*Va'yar Elokim et kol asher asah ve'hinei tov me'od* etc., And Hashem saw all that He made and it was very good, etc." We see then that Hashem is testifying that the entire creation is perfect and lacking nothing. Therefore since man's life is brief and fleeting, he must go through life enjoying what he has been given. In other words, man has no specific purpose in life.



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Rebbi Akiva, on the other hand, proved that Hashem intentionally left man the task of rectifying creation. For man was created to rectify himself during the amount of time allotted to him. It therefore states [Iyov 11:12], "Ve'ayir pereh adam yivaled. Man is born a wild donkey." Meaning, that when man is born, his spiritual side, i.e., refined character traits, Torah knowledge, and mitzvot, is totally undeveloped; rather, it is entirely dependent upon man's effort. Therefore, when one views the body from a purely physical perspective, it certainly seems that Hashem's handiwork is more pleasing. However, if man does not exert himself to develop spiritually then that same body can become a destructive force in humanity. But if he does invest the necessary effort, he can be transformed into the crown of humanity.

Rebbi Akiva even proved this from the creation itself, by bringing stalks and loaves of bread. He then asked which is more complete, the stalks or the bread. Even though the stalks are Hashem's handiwork, nevertheless, the bread is superior to it because it was developed and improved by man, whose mission it is to perfect the world. Therefore man was not born circumcised, so that he could fulfill his mission of perfecting himself. This is as Hashem tells our forefather Avraham that through fulfilling the mitzvah of circumcision he will become *tamim*, complete [see *Parashat Lech Lecha* 17:1]. According to this, we can explain the second statement of the Sages that man can either be the crown of humanity or can descend to such a level that even a mosquito is better than him.

The Royal Mosquito

Who is really better: man or mosquito? Well, every mosquito basically does the same thing. It

flies around, bites a few people and dies. It's the man that makes the difference.

Rebbi Shimon ben Elazar commented that he never saw a deer working hard to dry his figs, nor did he see a lion carrying heavy packages nor did he see a fox function as a storekeeper. Nonetheless, all animals seem to get their food and provisions relatively easily. Animals do just fine without companies and factories, electricity and banks, hospitals and cars. Mosquitos can even get into the king's palace and land right on the king's nose.

So if a person's ambitions and desires are in the physical world, and he has his eyes set on comfort, convenience, tasty food, etc., he should just know that he is no better than a mosquito. The mosquito plus all of his flying friends, birds, fish and animals, have it much better off. Their comfortable, fine-looking clothing grows with them and each being has built into its own system exactly what it needs to propel it to where it needs to go. Those who need to fly have wings. Those who need to swim have the ability to do so. Land animals each have the ability to move about exactly as quickly as they need to.

An animal is called "Beheimah" which can be broken down into two words, "Bah Mah" – in it is what it is. Whatever an animal needs it already has. It may get a bit bigger. It may transform into a butterfly, but it is what it is. It does not make itself any better than it already is.

Man, on the other hand, is handed that mission. That is why we do the Brit Milah on a tiny baby, to show that man was created imperfect and that man's very own actions are what perfects himself.



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Let Us Make Man

This is even hinted to in the creation of man himself. The *pasuk* states [*Bereishit* 1:26], "Naaseh adam be'tzalmeinu, Let us make man in our image." As we can see, the expression is in the plural, something which we do not find by any other creation apart from man. The reason for this is because the Torah is hinting that Hashem is turning to each and every individual saying, "Let us make man." In other words, Hashem is saying, "I will make the body, but you develop the spiritual content." Only then can man fulfill his purpose of being the crown of creation and "rule over the fish of the sea and bird of the sky, etc." [ibid.].

The Mitzvah of Circumcision

This is why in every generation, Jews considered it a great privilege and awesome responsibility to fulfill the mitzvah of circumcision. On the other hand, in many generations including our own, the mitzvah of circumcision has been under attack. It is because circumcision is the symbol of a Jew's mission in this world and his obligation to perfect himself.

It is related about Rebbi Yehudah Hanasi, his father, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, and mother endangered their lives to circumcise him. This is what *Tosafot* states in *Masechet Avodah Zarah* 10b: *Tosafot* writes that when Rebbi was born, the Romans decreed that it was forbidden to perform circumcision. Nevertheless, his father and mother circumcised him. The city's Roman governor said that he wished to send the baby and his mother to the Emperor. During their journey, his mother switched her son with Antoninus and nursed him until she came before the Emperor. When the Emperor looked at the baby, he saw that he was uncircumcised, and

therefore let them leave in peace. The governor was incredulous because he had seen that her baby was circumcised. He therefore attributed it to the fact that Hashem constantly performs miracles for the Jews, at which point he nullified the decree. *Tosafot* concludes by quoting the Yerushalmi which states that Antoninus eventually learned Torah and circumcised himself.

There are many stories of the Jewish Nation's extensive effort to perform circumcision in every generation, because it represents the foundation of man's purpose in the world of perfecting himself as well as creation. Every good deed and positive character trait developed is another brick in fulfilling man's purpose in creation, and by doing so, man is transformed into the crown of creation.

If a husband and wife realize that we are here to grow spiritually and develop our personalities into being better people, that will help them in making countless decisions. It will provide a compass for life. Instead of striving to make another few dollars in order to upgrade their material state of life, they will learn from the mitzvah of milah that there is a higher purpose. There is more to life than having a fancy home, an impressive wardrobe and the latest model of motor vehicle.

We are not like Tornosrufus who wished to live by the attitude that Hashem made us and the world exactly as He wants us to look at the end of our stay here, and while we are here, let's just eat, drink and be merry. Let us choose to be *talmidim* of Rebbi Akiva and realize that we are here to develop our character into being better people, and living a life of Torah and mitzvot will help us get there.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rav Mordechai Malka