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נשיא וראש מוסדות "אור המלך"

מחבר ספרי שו"ת דרך המלך, אמרי מרדכי, ודרכי המלך על המועדים ועוד
רשת מעונות, ורשת גנים, ת"ת פרי תואר, ובית יעקב פרי תואר, תיכון בית יעקב החדש, ת"ת מאור ישראל,
ישיבה קטנה ארחות יהודה, ביהמ"ד גבוה לרבנים ודיינים "לקח טוב" קופת "מפעל החסד" אלעד
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Parashat Tazria

Man's Mission is to Perfect Creation

In the beginning of *Parashat Tazria*, the Torah states [*Vayikra* 12:2-3], "*Isha ki tazria ve'yalda zachar ve'tamah shivat yamim*, When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, she shall be spiritually impure for seven days etc.: *Uva'yom ha'shmini yimol bisar arlato*, And on the eighth day his foreskin should be circumcised."

We will begin by mentioning two statements of our Sages. The first is related to the mitzvah of circumcision [*Midrash Tanchumah Tazria* 1]: The wicked Turnusrufus asked Rabbi Akiva, "Whose handiwork is more pleasing, that of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* or that of man? [Rabbi 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."

The second statement of our Sages us 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. First it states [*Vayikra* 11:46], 'This is the law (*Torat*) of the animal' and afterwards, 'When a woman conceives.'" [Also see *Sanhedrin* 38a which says similarly.]

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]?



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What is Man's Purpose in This World?

Perhaps we can explain that the Torah wishes to teach us an important principle – what man's purpose in creation is. It is this which the debate between Rebbi 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. 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 adam pereh yulad*, One who is like a wild donkey should be born like a man." 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, even though 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.

Let Us Make Man in Our Image

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.].

Self-Sacrifice to Fulfill the Mitzvah of Circumcision

This is why in every generation, Jews sacrificed their lives 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. This is as related about Rebbi Yehudah Hanasi, whose father, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, and mother sacrificed 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



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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 self-sacrifice 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.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Mordecai Malka