

Dear Rabbi Fried,

We have been blessed with a baby boy and held the bris this week. I have some questions in that regard, why there is a mitzvah to cut the skin of a baby? Also, if God is perfect, why would he create us in a way that is imperfect?

Joseph T.

Dear Joseph,

When G-d made a covenant to establish a special relationship with Abraham and his descendants, He decreed that a sign of the covenant should be indelibly marked on their bodies. The bris, or circumcision, is that sign.

The Torah says “G-d spoke to Abraham saying, ...this is my covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you – every male child among you shall be circumcised.” (Braishis/Genesis 17:12). Bris has enormous significance in Judaism as the very sign of our covenant and connection to G-d, enough to be mentioned 13 times in the Torah. A Gentile who converts to Judaism also enters into the covenant through Bris.

Some commentaries explain that G-d wanted a permanent sign on our bodies to distinguish us from the other nations in body and soul. Others maintain the message is that we are to be in control of our desires and passions, and not have our lusts rule over us. Since sexual urges are among the most powerful of human forces, the sign was put in an area that reminds us to refrain from immorality, and maintain the purity and holiness of Jewish family life and intimate marital relations. This is one reason this sign is only placed upon men, who are more inclined to promiscuity than women.

G-d purposely created man imperfect, with a mitzvah to perfect himself. This is the first mitzvah the child performs in a lifetime of service of G-d. Every mitzvah one performs is an act of perfecting himself and the world, physical and spiritual, effecting a Tikkun Olam. The very first mitzvah the child performs is one which is clearly a Tikkun, setting the direction for the rest of his life.

Throughout our history, Bris has truly been both a source of great joy, as well as an indication of our dedication to G-d and the upholding of our covenant to Him. Elijah the prophet is said to be present at each and every Bris. This is because he accused the Jewish people of not upholding the Bris, so G-d decreed he will attend every Bris forever, to report back to G-d that the Jews indeed are upholding this mitzvah of the covenant, often despite great sacrifice, evil decrees and danger.

*Some 25 years ago a Bris was held in a basement in Russia, when the boy was many months old, as it was the first time a mohel was available to perform it in that town. When the baby was handed to his mother after the Bris, she kissed him, shrieked and fainted. After awakening, the mother explained that she had taken a vow not to kiss her own baby until he had a Bris, because she was afraid she might become complacent to the lack of a mohel, and he would never have a bris, like so many other children in Russia. When she kissed the baby she fainted out of the intense, pent-up emotion of a mother who is now kissing her baby for the first time since he was born!*

Mazel Tov on the birth and bris of your son! You should be proud that you and your son have become links in the thousands-of-year long holy chain of Jews, traversing continents and tumultuous history back to Abraham, and bringing us all one step closer to our final redemption.