

CHABAD

 RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights*..... קדש

Friday 27 April 2012 - 5 Iyyar 5772
 Sedra Tazria-Metzora

DOCTORS OF THE SOUL

JEWES ARE FAMOUS FOR THEIR SKILL AS DOCTORS. THE TORAH READING this week¹ helps us understand why. The first Sedra opens with the beautiful event of a woman giving birth to a baby: a medical incident in which all humanity is involved. Yet the text continues with a reference to a very special surgical procedure: circumcision.

In the Talmud and the Code of Law there is discussion of questions about the health of the baby prior to circumcision; if this is not up to par, the operation and celebration must be delayed. Sages of the ancient past define the symptoms of jaundice and other conditions which might affect the newly-born. Then there are descriptions of the actual procedure during and after circumcision, with details about washing the infant and ensuring a healthy recovery. It is quite likely that this section of Jewish knowledge helped to encourage an interest in medical matters among Jews.

Modern physicians have commented on the positive medical benefits of circumcision. However, infinitely more significant are the spiritual benefits. Through this brit, literally 'pact', the young baby is joined in a unique bond with G-d. He has become thoroughly part of the Jewish people, and is now given his Jewish name. This sacred pact is a tremendous privilege: whenever we recite the Grace after Meals,

in the second paragraph we thank G-d for granting it to us, together with other great gifts such as the Land of Israel² and the Torah. While a boy has to experience circumcision, a Jewish baby girl is considered 'as if circumcised'³, meaning that she is *born* with this pact with G-d.

The Torah speaks about the physical circumcision of the body, and also about the spiritual circumcision of the heart⁴. This means increasing our spiritual sensitivity, relating more to holiness.

This presents a challenge, especially in our predominantly secular generation. One may have a longing for food, for the latest model car, for a state-of-the-art computer; but do we have a longing to pray to G-d or to study Torah?

In the absence of this longing we need to prompt ourselves, through our own determined effort. Gradually, as if acquiring a taste for a new kind of delicacy, we begin to enjoy spiritual aspects of life and we miss them when they are not freely available. Sometimes it is precisely when we cannot have them that we begin to really yearn for them. There are moving depictions of Jews in Communist labour camps and even in the horrors of a concentration camp longing to be able to fulfil a Mitzva, a command of the Torah⁵.

Sometimes a Jewish man or woman today who has somehow strayed far from the Jewish community and Jewish life experiences a tremendous yearning to return. This is the expression of the inner spiritual force which is concealed in the heart of every Jew. The revelation of this force is the effect of the circumcision of the heart: sometimes by our own effort; sometimes simply coming from G-d⁶.

The command to carry out physical circumcision may have helped Jews become doctors of the body; the theme of inner spiritual circumcision has helped them become doctors of the soul. The Torah potentially gives us the wisdom to provide spiritual guidance for all humanity, which will be fully achieved in a wholesome way with the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, the heart of the world.

1. Leviticus chs.12-15. 2. Today (Friday, 5 Iyar), we particularly pray to G-d for the safety of the Land of Israel. We pray that all efforts to protect the security and sanctity of the Land will be successful. 3. See Talmud Avodah Zarah 27a. 4. Deut.30:6. 5. See Y. Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, E. Oshry, *Responsa from the Holocaust*. 6. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Tanya*, Part 4, sec.4.

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TAZRIA - METZORA

THE GOOD TONGUE

'*Get lost!*' shouted Simon, a large, hefty boy from an older class in school. He had crept up unseen near an old man sitting on a bench on the corner. The old man jumped in shock. Yoni, Avi and Jonathan, who were walking in the same direction as Simon, but were some distance behind him, looked on silently.

It was the old man with a white beard which had long turned yellow from tobacco. Yoni remembered him since he had been a child - always sitting at the same corner on the High Street. To Yoni it seemed as if he was wearing the same clothes as the first time he saw him.

'Na, na, na!' taunted Simon, nastily, at the old man. The three younger boys stared incredulously. 'How could he be so horrid?' thought Yoni. Simon was laughing loudly. Then he suddenly noticed the three smaller, boys looking at him in consternation. 'What do you little-uns want?' he said angrily. 'I'm just having a bit of fun. He doesn't mind.'

The three boys did not say anything, just stared. Nonetheless Simon turned tail and ran on ahead, as if they were about to attack him.

'I'm sorry,' said Yoni to the old man. 'I'm sorry he was so nasty.'

'Don't worry,' said the old man. 'I've known Simon since he was a small boy. He always used to be nice and say hello to me. Then one day he started playing tricks on me and being like he is now. But don't worry, he'll grow out of it.'

Feeling upset and disturbed, the three boys reluctantly continued on their way to school. 'The old man looked so lonely,' said Yoni, a surge of feeling running through his body. 'Simon is so... so...' Words failed him. 'Let's tell the headmaster. Or his parents.' 'Yes,' said Avi. 'Let's make sure everyone knows what he's done. Then he'll never do it again.' 'We could make a poster about him and put it up on the school notice-board,' said Jonathan. 'We'll get the younger classes to make fun of him...'

The boys started laughing at the thought. Yoni was also laughing, he wasn't quite sure why. But something kept bothering him, something he was trying to remember... something relevant... his mind wandered. 'Yoni! stop drawing pictures and listen to the lesson!' Yoni grunted and put his pen on the table. It was a nice spring day, which made it hard to pay attention. Nevertheless, he made an effort and began listening.

'One must never talk Lashon Hara, which means saying bad things about a person. In the time of the Temple someone who *did* speak Lashon Hara would get Tzara'at, leprosy. This is the illness described in the Sedra. You should not speak bad about someone even if it is true. Of course, sometimes it is more complicated. If you see a burglar stealing, obviously you are right to tell the police.'

This made Yoni worry even more. Should they tell the headmaster? Is this like the case of the burglar? Or what...? Slowly the day went by, and they were walking home together. They hadn't told anyone.

'Yoni! Yoni, listen!' said Avi. Yoni began to focus, he had been dreaming. Simon was there, talking to them. 'You've got to understand, I'm really sorry,' he was saying. 'With you three looking at me I suddenly realised it was wrong. I'm going back to apologise right now. *And* I've bought him some kosher sweets.'

Strangely enough, he looked sincere, and he hurried off to where the old man was still sitting. 'So what do we do now?' asked Jonathan, who had been looking forward to making an accusing poster. 'I don't know,' said Yoni. 'Let's hope it lasts. Then we won't even have to *think* of speaking bad about someone, only good!'

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