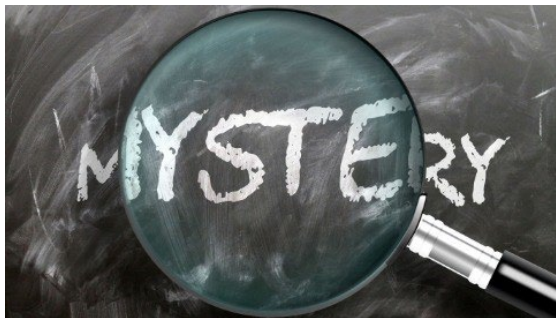


Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Unraveling the Circumcision Mystery



Today, both Jews and Muslims practice circumcision and see it as a confirmation of their faith in God. Even more so, Jews recognize circumcision as a sign of an everlasting covenant with God.

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayera* (Genesis 18:1–22:24), “*Abraham circumcised his son Isaac*

when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him” (Genesis 21:4).

Considering circumcision's significance as “*an everlasting covenant*” (Genesis 17:13) with God, it is mysterious and incomprehensible that Christianity proclaimed it obsolete.

Throughout the Jewish Bible, circumcision is a sign of unwavering loyalty to God. The entire male population of the Jewish nation was circumcised (Exodus 48-49) in preparation for the Exodus from Egypt. Forty years later, a new generation was circumcised before entering the Land of Israel (Joshua 5:3).

Circumcision is so essential to the Jewish faith, Jews have risked their lives to practice it. When the Greeks, who opposed circumcision, occupied Israel, they outlawed the practice under the penalty of death. This decree was a factor in the Maccabees' military revolt to restore religious freedom, culminating in the Chanukah miracle.

Christian rejection of circumcision is also surprising, considering that the original Christians practiced circumcision.

However, when Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, this new religion discarded the commandments and denigrated circumcision in order to attract the gentile masses.

This gentile influence also led Christianity to adopt pagan beliefs such as the trinity and the bodily incarnation of God. No wonder the first Jewish Christians, known as Ebionites, were excommunicated from the church when they refused to accept these pagan beliefs or abolish the commandments, including circumcision.

Circumcision and its spiritual message are as relevant today as they were in biblical times.

Circumcision and its spiritual message are as relevant today as they were in biblical times.

God wants the Jewish people to be a partner in completing the creation of the world. We do this by refining and repairing it according to God's will, wisdom, and instruction.

Therefore, God left man uncircumcised, so he could partner with God and bring the body to its most refined and initially intended form. Furthermore, circumcision demonstrates our control over our sexual passions, showing that we value spiritual fulfillment over unbridled physical pleasure.

An allusion to this mission of refining and elevating the material world is also in this week's Torah portion.

After Abraham circumcised his son, the Torah says he “*planted an orchard in Beer-Sheba and proclaimed the LORD, God of the Universe*” (Genesis 21:33). Our sages explain that Abraham's “orchard” was a place to provide visitors with food, water, and a place to rest.

Abraham used his hospitality as an opportunity to educate his guests that there is one God Who provides for their needs. This lesson is evident when we examine the Hebrew original. The words [אל עולם–*El Olam*], is usually translated as “God of **the** Universe.” However, since the prefix [ה–*hei*] that means “the” is missing, this verse literally reads, “God Universe.”

The universe exists only because God constantly creates it.

This grammatical nuance indicates that Abraham was emphasizing that God and the universe are not two separate entities; the universe exists only because God constantly creates it.

Consequently, by using the material world in the service of God, we reveal its intrinsic spirituality. Thus, both physical practice and spiritual intention go hand in hand. Integrating this spiritual lesson into our service of God is one explanation of what the Torah refers to as “*circumcision of the heart*” (Deuteronomy 10:16).

This Jewish perspective allows us to see the commandments as an opportunity to connect to God rather than as a burden, as some religions claim. No wonder King Solomon refers to the Torah and the commandments as “*a tree of life to all who hold on to it*” (Proverbs 3:18).

With a better appreciation of Judaism, we can pursue a spiritual relationship with God and observe the commandments with sincerity and purity.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

© 2022 Jews for Judaism