

“For I have designated you the father of many nations”

When Avraham Separated the “Orlah” from the Kedushah of the “Bris” He Was Designated “Father of Many Nations” in order to Separate the Goyim from the Kedushah of Yisrael

In this week’s parsha, parshas Lech Lecha, we learn about one of the most essential of all the “taryag-mitzvos”; Avraham Avinu is commanded to perform the mitzvah of “milah”—ritual circumcision. It is only fitting, therefore, that we examine the three components HKB”H incorporated within this mitzvah: (1) The mitzvah of “milah” itself, which Avraham was commanded to perform, (2) the addition of the letter “hei” to his original name “אברם”, transforming his name to “אברהם” and (3) the fact that HKB”H designated him **“Father of Many Nations”**—“אב המון גויים”. Let us review the pertinent pesukim (Bereishis 17, 1):

“ויהי אברם בן תשעים שנה ותשע שנים, וירא ה' אל אברם ויאמר אליו, אני א-ל-ל שדי התהלך לפני והיה תמים, ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך וארכה אותך במאד מאד... אני הנח בריתי אתך והיית לאב המון גוים, ולא יקרא עוד את שמך אברם והיה שמך אברהם כי אב המון גוים נתתיך, והפריתי אותך במאד מאד ונתתיך לגוים ומלכים ממך יצאו, והקימותי את בריתי ביני ובינך ובין זרעך אחריך לדורותם לברית עולם להיות לך לאלקים ולזרעך אחריך.”

When Avram was ninety-nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him, “I am Kel Shakkai; walk before Me and be perfect. I will set My covenant between Me and you, and I will increase you most exceedingly.” Avram fell upon his face, and G-d spoke with him saying, “As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be a father of a multitude of nations; your name shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations; I will make you most exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you; and kings shall descend from you. I will uphold My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you, throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant, to be a G-d to you and to your offspring after you.”

Rashi explains the implication of the addition of the letter “hei” to his name: **“Av hamon goyim”—this is an abbreviation of his name, Avraham. The letter “reish” which was originally in his name signified that he was only a father to Aram, his homeland; although, he was now father to the entire world, it did not move from its place. Although the letter “yud” of Sarai (which was displaced) complained to the Shechinah, until He added it to the name Yehoshua ...**

Why Did HKB”H Appoint Avraham “Father of Many Nations”

Now, HKB”H promises Avraham: **“I will make you most exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you.”** Rashi explains that this refers to Yisrael and Edom; for Yishmael had already been born; so G-d was not informing him about Yishmael. According to Rashi’s comment, when HKB”H informs Avraham: **“I will make nations of you,”** He is merely clarifying His previous statement: **“For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.”** For, in addition to Yishmael, who had already descended from Avraham, Yisrael and Edom were also destined to descend from his son Yitzchak, via Yaakov and Eisav.

We find a similar explanation in Rabeinu Bachayei’s commentary: **“כי אב המון גוים נתתיך. היה אברהם אבינו ע”ה אב העולם, כאדם הראשון שהיה אב המון גוים, שכל התולדות משתלשות. וכן מצינו באברהם שנקרא אדם, ממה שדרשו חז”ל (ב”ר יד-ו) האדם הגדול בענקים (יהושע Avraham Avinu a”h was father of the world, like Adam HaRishon was the father of many nations; for all of the generations descended from him. Similarly, we find that Avraham was called Adam, from Chazal’s elucidation (B.R. 14, 6): “The biggest man among the giants” (Yehoshua 14, 15) refers to Avraham.**

This is somewhat perplexing, however. For, the mitzvah of “milah” was given to Avraham to establish a covenant between G-d and Avraham and Avraham’s descendants. This is stated explicitly later on in the parsha (Bereishis 17, 19): **“ויאמר אלקים: אבל שרה אשתך יולדת לך בן וקראת את שמו יצחק, והקימותי את בריתי אתו לברית עולם לזרעו אחריו... ואת בריתי אקים את יצחק אשר תלד לך שרה למועד.”** **G-d said, “Indeed your wife Sarah will bear you a son and you shall name him Yitzchak; and I will fulfill My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him . . . But I will maintain My covenant through Yitzchak, whom Sarah will bear to you at this appointed time next year.”**

Now, this covenant that HKB”H established with the descendants of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham, only applied to Yaakov and his offspring, Yisrael; it did not apply to Eisav and his offspring. For, when HKB”H persuades Avraham to comply with Sarah’s decision to send Yishmael away, He says (ibid. 21, 12): **“כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע”—since through Yitzchak will offspring be considered yours.** Regarding this passuk, we find the following well-known elucidation (Sanhedrin 59b): **“כי ביצחק, ולא כל יצחק”—**only part of Yitzchak will be considered your true offspring, not all that descend from Yitzchak. Specifically, Yishmael and Eisav are not considered to be the true descendants of Avraham. That being the case, why does HKB”H designate Avraham **“the father of nations”** specifically when commanding him to perform the mitzvah of “milah,” when establishing a covenant with him and his descendants Yisrael, the offspring of Yaakov? This seems to be somewhat contradictory; he is being heralded as the father of all the nations of the world, but this covenant only includes a portion of his descendants.

A Remarkable Idea from the Shela HaKadosh

We shall begin to shed some light on the matter by presenting a precious introduction from the wonderful teachings of the Shela hakadosh (Toldos). He teaches us that HKB”H specifically arranged for all of the nations to descend from Avraham Avinu—the source of kedushah of the people of Yisrael. For, this illustrates that the source and existence of all of the nations emanate strictly from kedushah. Yet, as they expanded and multiplied down below, they gravitated away from the kedushah and rebelled against Hashem. At the end of days, when the complete tikun will become a reality, Avraham—the source of kedushah—will subdue all of the

nations of the world that descended from him and return them to the domain of kedushah. Thus, they will be purified and cleansed of all the evil that consumed them, as we assert in our tefilos (Aleinu L’shabeiach):

“ועל כן נקוה לך ה' אלקינו לראות מהרה בתפארת עוזך, להעביר גילולים מן הארץ, והאלילים כרות יכרתון, לתקן עולם במלכות שדי, וכל בני בשר יקראו בשמך להפנות אליך כל רשעי ארץ, יכירו וידעו כל יושבי תבל, כי לך תכרע כל ברך, תישבע כל לשון, לפניך ה' אלקינו יכרעו ויפולו, ולכבוד שמך יקר יתנו, ויקבלו כולם את עול מלכותך, ותמלוך עליהם מהרה לעולם ועד.”

We therefore put our hope in You, Hashem, our G-d, to soon behold the glory of Your might in banishing idolatry from the earth and the false gods will be utterly exterminated to perfect the world as the kingdom of Shakkai; and all mankind will invoke Your Name, to turn back to You, all the wicked of the earth. They will realize and know, all the inhabitants of the world, that to You every knee must bend, every tongue must swear allegiance. Before You, Hashem our G-d, they will bow and prostrate themselves, and to the glory of Your Name give honor. And they will all accept upon themselves the yoke of Your kingdom, and You will reign over them, soon, forever and ever.

Like a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I would like to elaborate on the words of the Shela hakadosh. First of all, this mitzvah differs from all of the other mitzvos in that it is the only mitzvah that Avraham Avinu was commanded to accept upon himself and his descendants after him. Why was he commanded to perform this mitzvah rather than any of the other mitzvos? Secondly, the commentaries struggle to find a rationale for the institution of two berachot related to the mitzvah of “milah”: (1) **“אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו על המילה”—Who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us with regards to the “milah,”** and (2) **“אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו להכניסו בבריתו של אברהם אבינו”—Who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us to enter him into the covenant of Avraham Avinu.**

It is also worthwhile addressing the question of the Shem MiShmuel (Vayeira 5681): **“יש להבין למה אברהם אבינו ע”ה לא נולד מהול, כמו אדם הראשון ונח שאמרו ז”ל (אבות דרבי נתן פ”ב) שנולדו מהולים, ואברהם שהיה גדול מנח לא נולד מהול ונצרך להצטוות עליה.”** **We need to understand why Avraham Avinu, a”h, was not born circumcised, as were Adam HaRishon and Noach . . . and Avraham, who was greater than Noach was not born circumcised and needed to be commanded to perform the mitzvah.**

“For I have cherished him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice.” In this manner, he created a separation between his children, Yisrael, and the goyim, who did not want to accept upon themselves the obligations associated with the Torah and the ways of Hashem.

So we find that at the end of his life, Avraham Avinu distances the children of the concubines—who were not part of the domain of kedushah—from the kedushah of Yitzchak, his true offspring, as it is written (ibid. 25, 5): **ויתן אברהם את כל אשר לו ליצחק, ולבני הפילגשים אשר לאברהם נתן אברהם מתנות, וישלחם מעל יצחק—Avraham gave all that he had to Yitzchak; but to the children of the concubines who were Avraham’s, Avraham gave gifts; then he sent them away from Yitzchak his son, while he was still alive, eastward to the land of the east.** Rashi comments: **“He gave over to them a name of tumah.”**

The Letter “Hei” of **אברהם** Separates Yisrael from the Other Nations

Taking the high-road, let us proceed to explain why HKB”H chose to add the letter “hei” to Avraham’s name. Let us refer to the following passuk (ibid. 2, 4): **“אלה תולדות השמים והארץ -- בהבראם-- these are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created (“בהבראם”).** The Midrash provides us with two interpretations regarding this passuk. The first interpretation (B.R. 12, 9) views the word **בהבראם** as an anagram of **באברהם**, indicating that the world was created in the merit of Avraham. The second interpretation (ibid. 12, 10) breaks down the word **בהבראם** into **בה’ בראם**, conveying the fact that HKB”H created the heavens and the earth with the letter “hei.”

We can suggest that the two elucidations go together hand in hand. In fact, the world was created with the letter “hei” that HKB”H added to the name Avraham, after he performed the mitzvah of “milah.” Therefore, the passuk states that He created them with the letter “hei”: **בהבראם - בה’ בראם**. This also accords beautifully with the interpretation that the world was created in the merit of Avraham, as indicated by the fact that rearranging the letters of **בהבראם** produces **באברהם**.

Yet, to comprehend why HKB”H chose to create the world with the letter “hei,” let us introduce Rashi’s commentary on

this passuk: **בהבראם בה’ בראם, שנאמר (ישעיה כו-ד) ביה ה’ צור עולמים, בב’ אותיות הללו של השם יצר שני עולמים, ולמדך כאן שהעולם הזה נברא בה’א, רמז שירדו הרשעים למטה לראות שחת, כה’א זאת שסתומה מכל צדדים ופתוחה. The word בהבראם indicates that He created them with the letter “hei,” as it says (Yeshayah 26, 4): “In י”ה, Hashem, is the strength of the worlds.” In other words, with these two letters of the holy Name, he formed two worlds. It teaches you here that this world was created with the letter “hei.” This alludes to the fact that the wicked will descend below to see their doom (hell); like this letter “hei,” which is closed on all sides and open at the bottom, providing an opening through which to descend.** At first glance, this seems extremely surprising. How can we possibly imagine that HKB”H would create the world with a letter alluding to the tragic downfall of the wicked? Notwithstanding, the true explanation is provided by the Gemara (Menachos 29b):

“אלה תולדות השמים והארץ בהבראם, אל תקרי בהבראם אלא בה’ בראם. ומפני מה נברא העולם הזה בה’, מפני שדומה לאכסדרא, שכל הרוצה לצאת יצא. ומאי טעמא תליא כרעיה, דאי הדר בתשובה מעיילי ליה, וליעייל בהך לא מסתייעא מילתא.”

It states in the Torah: **“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth בהבראם. Do not read the word as it is actually written—בהבראם—but rather as בראם בה’ בראם. And why was Olam HaZeh created with the letter “hei”? Because it resembles a pavilion (Rashi: it is open underneath); so that anyone who wishes to leave (go astray) can leave (to lead a life of sin).** The the Gemara asks: **And for what reason is the left leg of the “hei” hanging (i.e. it is not connected to the top of the “hei”)? So that if he performs teshuvah, they can bring him back in (through the upper opening between the suspended leg and the top of the “hei”).** Once again the Gemara poses a question: **Why don’t they simply bring him back through the very same opening (through which he left)? That is unlikely.** In other words, once he has exited through that opening to embark on a life of sin, it is unlikely that he would succeed in returning through that same opening; because the yetzer hara is standing there at the ready to trip him up a second time.

Thus, we learn why HKB”H created the world with the letter “hei.” On the one hand, it alludes to the fact that the wicked descend to the depths of despair and doom through the lower opening of the “hei.” On the other hand, it alludes magnificently to the mitzvah of teshuvah; a Jew should always know that he can return to HKB”H through the upper opening in the

“hei.” Hence, we can suggest that this allusion is inherent in the very word תשובה, which can be broken down to spell תשובה—indicating that the mitzvah of teshuvah is alluded to by the upper opening of the letter “hei,” through which the “ba’al teshuvah” can always reenter.

We can find an allusion to this phenomenon in the following passuk (Shir HaShirim 5, 2): “קול דודי דופק פתחו לי”—**the sound of My Beloved knocks, saying: “Open your heart to Me.”** The Midrash Rabbah (ibid.) provides the following elucidation: “אמר הקב”ה לישראל, בני פתחו לי פתח אחד של תשובה כחודה של מחט”—**HKB”H said to Yisrael: “My child, open for Me a single opening of teshuvah like the eye of a needle.”** In truth, it is impossible to reenter through the wide opening at the bottom of the “hei.” Nevertheless, all HKB”H asks of us is to create a small opening of teshuvah, similar to the eye of a needle in the upper part of the “hei.”

This now enlightens us as to why HKB”H chose to create the world with the letter “hei” that He added to Avraham’s name, when he fulfilled the mitzvah of “milah.” Because the shape of the letter “hei” alludes to the clarification process, sifting out the bad from the good. It is open at the bottom alluding to the nations of the world, such as the descendants of Eisav and Yishmael, who did not want to accept the Torah; instead they chose to follow the whims and desires of their hearts. It is their fate to descend downward to their doom in the nethermost region of the letter “hei.” The small window near the top of the letter “hei,” however, through which “ba’alei teshuvah return, is designated only for the offspring of Yisrael—the holy people, who can achieve tikun by means of teshuvah.

At last, we have gained a better understanding of the amazing connection between the following three elements: (1) The fact that Avraham Avinu was commanded to perform the mitzvah of “milah,” (2) the fact that HKB”H added the letter “hei” to his name, changing it to **Avraham**—אברהם—and (3) the fact that HKB”H designated Avraham at that same time: **“אב המון”**

גוים—the father of many nations. All three of these elements are related to the process of clarifying and separating good from evil, a process which began with Avraham. An individual’s fulfillment of the mitzvah of “milah,” involves the removal of the pollution of the “orlah” from the “bris kodesh.” The designation of **“father of many nations”** obligated Avraham to fulfill the mitzvah of “milah” on a general, communal scale—separating the other nations of the world, and more specifically the descendants of Yishmael and Eisav, from the holy offspring of Yisrael. This clarification process is alluded to by the letter “hei,” which HKB”H added to his name. For, while the “reshaim”—the wicked—of the nations of the world, descend to their doom through the open lower portal of the letter “hei”; Yisrael ascend and enter through the open upper portal in the letter “hei.”

With this understanding, it becomes clear why they instituted two berachot to be recited in conjunction with the mitzvah of “milah.” The first berachah: **“על מצות מילה”**—addresses the individual’s obligation to remove the “orlah” from the “bris kodesh,” thereby separating the good from the bad. The second berachah, however: **“להכניסו בבריתו של אברהם אבינו”**—relates to the general, communal obligation for the holy people of Yisrael to separate themselves from all of the other nations of the world, who are collectively considered uncircumcised. This process was initiated by Avraham, and we accept it upon ourselves to follow in his footsteps to complete the necessary tikun. By completing the tikun, separating the evil from the good, both on an individual basis and as a community, we shall merit the acceptance of our prayer by HKB”H (Mussaf Shalosh Regalim): **“וקרב פזורינו מבין הגוים, ונפוצותינו כנס מירכתי ארץ, והביאנו “bring near our scattered people from among the nations, and gather our dispersed ones from the ends of the earth. Bring us to Tziyon, Your city, with joyous song, and to Yerushalayim, the home of Your sanctuary, with everlasting joy—swiftly, in our times. Amen.**



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