

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM SHULCHAN ARUCH LEARNING
PROJECT

The Noahide Laws – Lesson Forty Two



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Lifecycle V: Circumcision



Introduction

Circumcision is one of most well-known of Jewish obligations. Although Abraham and his household were commanded in circumcision, this has very little relevance to today's non-Jews. Nevertheless, may a Noahide elect to voluntarily circumcise himself? This is the topic of our lesson.

Talmud Sanhedrin 59b

[Sanhedrin 59b](#) discusses in detail the relevance of circumcision to Abraham, his household, and his descendants. The following summary is based upon Sanhedrin 59b and its commentaries.

Genesis 17:10 – 13 states:

*This is My covenant that you shall keep between Me, **you**, and **your offspring after you**: every male **among you** shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin and it shall be a token of the covenant between Me and you. He **among you** that is eight days old shall be circumcised, every male throughout **your** generations that is **born in your house** ... **He that is born in your house**... must be circumcised; and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.*

The Torah is very specific in commanding circumcision only to Abraham, his household, and his offspring. In the first generation of this commandment, it applied only to Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael. However, Genesis 21:12 later states:

Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice, since through Isaac will your offspring considered yours.

We see that only Isaac and his offspring were, in distinction to Ishmael, considered heirs to Abraham's spiritual legacy. Therefore, circumcision was only obligatory for the descendants of Isaac. Similarly, Isaac said to Jacob:

And God will give to you and your descendants the blessings of Abraham.¹

We see from here that God designated Jacob, not Esau, as the heir to the Abrahamic legacy of which circumcision was the sign. Those descendants of Jacob/Israel are the Jewish people of today.

The Descendants of Keturah/Hagar

The Torah states:

*Vayosef Abraham and took a wife whose name was **Keturah**.²*

The Midrash³ and Torah commentaries⁴ note two anomalies in this verse. The first is the word *Vayosef*, which is a strange construction for introducing marriage, implying “gathering in” or “adding.”⁵ Furthermore, Keturah is not a proper name, but a title meaning “restrained” or “controlled.” Some commentaries also interpret the name as a reference to *ketores*, incense, meaning that she and her deeds were pleasing. The Midrash explains that Abraham remarried Hagar, taking her again as his wife. Hagar had remained faithful to Abraham, reconciling with him following the death of Sarah.

Abraham and Hagar produced six children from this union (see Gen. 25:2). The commentaries explain that these children and their descendants were obligated in circumcision. After all, they were born into Abraham's home and, unlike Ishmael and Esau, were never actually excluded from the command of circumcision.⁶

The descendants of these children eventually intermarried with the descendants of Ishmael to the point that they are indistinguishable from the Ishmaelites.

¹ Gen. 28:4.

² Gen. 25:1.

³ [Tanchuma](#) 5; [Bereshit Rabbah](#) 61:4.

⁴ [Rashi](#); [Rambar](#); many others to this verse.

⁵ See [Targumim](#).

⁶ See the [Malbim](#) and [Zohar](#) who discuss the differences between Ishmael and these siblings.

Therefore, the modern Ishmaelites, those of paternal Arab ancestry, are obligated in circumcision.⁷ Maimonides summarizes the Talmud's conclusions in *Hilchos Melachim* 10:7-8:

§7 Only Abraham and his descendants were commanded in circumcision, as Genesis 17:9-10 states: "Keep My covenant, you and your offspring... you shall circumcise every male." The descendants of Ishmael are excluded by Genesis 21:12: "It is through Isaac, that your offspring will be called." Esau's descendants are also excluded, for Isaac told Jacob in Genesis 28:4: "May God grant Abraham's blessing to you and your descendants," implying that only he is the true offspring of Abraham who maintained his faith and his righteous behavior. Thus, they alone are obligated in circumcision.

§8 Our Sages related that the descendants of Keturah, who are the offspring of Abraham that came after Isaac and Ishmael, are also obligated in circumcision. At present, the descendants of Ishmael have become intermingled with the descendants of Keturah. Therefore, they are all obligated to be circumcised on the eighth day.

May A Noahide Voluntarily Undergo Circumcision?

The Talmud teaches:

Rabbah Bar Bar Chanaha said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: a ger toshav who allows 12 months to pass without circumcising himself is like any other idolater. [The Sages responded:] That is in a case when he vowed to circumcise himself and failed to do so.⁸

Explanation: this case is of a non-Jew who, when accepting the seven Noahide laws to become a *ger toshav*, voluntarily vows to circumcise himself. If he hasn't done so after 12 months, we assume that his vow was insincere. If he was insincere at the time of his vow, we must also doubt his sincerity in accepting the Noahides laws.⁹

We learn a number of things from this passage. For one, it appears that a *ger toshav* may circumcise himself. We also see that circumcision is voluntary – a *ger toshav* is certainly not obligated to circumcise himself.

⁷ The minimum of circumcision required to fulfill this commandment is different than for Jews. While Jews must remove the entire foreskin, the Bnei Keturah fulfill this mitzvah with the removal of the outer foreskin. See [Shaagas Aryeh](#); [Minchas Chinuch](#) 2.

⁸ [Avodah Zarah 65a](#).

⁹ See commentaries to *Avodah Zarah* *ibid*.

Maimonides writes in his discussion of *ger toshav*:

*Anyone who agrees to circumcise himself and allows twelve months to pass without doing so is considered an idolater.*¹⁰

In contradistinction to the rest of the section, Maimonides applies the Talmud’s statement to “**anyone**.” Shall we understand this to mean that the Talmud’s statement is not unique to *ger toshav*, but applies to any non-Jew who accepts the Noahide laws? If it applied to “anyone,” even modern Noahides, then who exactly “considers him an idolater?”

Also, when is this “vow to circumcise himself” made? Is it connected to the acceptance of the obligation of the Noahide laws, or is it talking about any religiously motivated circumcision? Perhaps, we are reading too much into Maimonides. Perhaps “anyone” should be read in context, meaning any *ger toshav*. Even in this case, though, it may be that circumcision is permitted to any Noahide.

Each possibility leads to a variety of possible conclusions that we will summarize shortly.

Possibly Prohibited?

[Rabbenu Yerucham](#)¹¹ *paskened*, decided, that it is prohibited to circumcise a non-Jew for any reason other than conversion to Judaism. The [Rama](#) agrees and cites this as the *halacha*, law, in the Shulchan Aruch.¹² Additionally, we note that a Jew may circumcise a non-Jew for medical purposes.¹³ Taking these two *halachos* together, it appears that a Jew is precluded from circumcising a Noahide for religious purposes. Yet, if Noahides may practice circumcision (as the Talmud certainly implies), then why would it be prohibited for Jews to assist them?

The *poskim* who come after the Rama are very uncertain as to the reason for this law and details of its application. Indeed, it poses a number of contradictions to other statements in the Talmud and *poskim*.¹⁴ It is possible that the source is from

¹⁰ *Hilchos Melachim* 8:10.

¹¹ In his *Toldos Adam VeChavab*, cited in *Bais Yosef* at the end of YD 266.

¹² *Yoreh Deah* 263:5.

¹³ See *Anodah Zarab 26b* with the comments of the *Chiddushei HaRitva*, *Rashi*, and *Tosafos*. See *Otzar HaBris I* p.59 in the *Ohalei Shem. Shulchan Aruch paskens* such in YD 268:9.

¹⁴ Many of the *nosei kelim* on *Shulchan Aruch*, both on YD 263:5 and 268:9, debate the reasons. The [Taz](#) holds that by assisting a non-Jew the Jew is nullifying circumcision as a sign of the covenant. This would present a basis for prohibiting Noahide circumcision. However, it is not clear that the

the *Zobar*,¹⁵ which writes that Joseph sinned by encouraging the Egyptians to adopt circumcision. This was despite Joseph's intent being for the sake of heaven. However, it appears that these were forced circumcisions, which would be prohibited in any case.

Conclusions

There does not appear to be any reason in Torah literature to assume that Noahides are prohibited from circumcising themselves. To the contrary, it appears that circumcision was a sign of commitment to the creator even before Abraham was commanded in it. After all, the Midrash¹⁶ states that Adam, Shes, and Noah all came into the world circumcised, attaching special significance to this.

Furthermore, if there was a prohibition on Noahides practicing circumcision, then the prohibition would upon them, and not as a prohibition upon Jews against circumcising them.

It seems that the Talmud permits any Noahide to voluntarily circumcise himself. Maimonides, citing the Talmud, does so only for the issue of trusting a *ger toshav*'s acceptance of the Noahide laws. There is no reason to assume that there should be any difference here between Noahides and *ger toshav*. There are further reasons to permit voluntary circumcision to Noahides that will be discussed in the live class.

It is possible to object to Noahide circumcision based on the prohibition against wounding oneself. However, it does not appear that voluntary circumcision would fall under this prohibition.¹⁷

Although Noahides may voluntarily circumcise themselves, using a Jewish doctor or *mohel*, circumciser, may present problems for the Jew.

Taz himself would oppose Noahide circumcision (this will be discussed in the live lesson). It is possible that this logic would have prohibited Noahide circumcision before matan Torah, yet not afterwards. See also Levush; Meil Tzedaka 14:2; Otzar HaBris ibid. for further discussion of the underlying reasons.

¹⁵ *Miketz*.

¹⁶ *Tanbuma Noach* 6:5.

¹⁷ For perspectives on this issue, see *Panim Yafos to Lech Lecha*; *HaMikneh*, end of *Kiddushin*; *Glyoni Shas* (Engil) to Avodah Zarah 10b; *Meshech Chochmah Vayisblach* 34:22.

This is because of the prohibition of a Jew circumcising a gentile.¹⁸ In such a case, the *mohel* or doctor may decline.

We will discuss practical aspects and reasons for voluntary Noahide circumcision more in the live lesson.

Summary of This Lesson

1. Noahides have no obligation in circumcision.
2. However, those of paternal Arab ancestry may be obligated in circumcision because of being *Bnei Keturah*.
3. Voluntary circumcision appears permitted to Noahides for reasons that will be discussed in the live class.
4. However, there is a prohibition prohibiting a Jew from circumcising a non-Jew. The reasons for this prohibition are very unclear. However, it seems unrelated to the question of whether or not a Noahide may voluntarily undergo circumcision.

¹⁸ Although it is possible to find room for leniency (especially based upon the *Shach*, however his views are problematic, as proven by the *nekudas bakesef*), most *poskim* are conservative. See [Shu"t Har Tzvi](#) YD 215; [Minchas Yitzchok](#) I:36.