



## Are Women Permitted to Perform Circumcision?

### Are Jewish Women Lacking the Holiness of Circumcision?

The mitzvah of circumcision is so fundamental to Judaism that it is often one of the last mitzvot that remains in even the most assimilated Jewish homes. But what about women? Do we not have a share in this vital mitzvah that sets the Jewish people apart from all the rest of the nations? Interestingly, in the *Grace after Meals*, both men and women recite, “We thank you... for Your covenant which You have sealed in our flesh.” Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi explains that although there are authorities who maintain that women should omit this phrase, nevertheless, the custom is for them to recite the entire text of the blessing. The reason for this is that a man is not called a man, unless he has a wife. We learn this from, “He created them, male and female, and called their name ‘man.’” (*Bereishit* 5:2). Thus, a male and a female are considered one body. Therefore, also women say the words concerning the covenant of circumcision performed on their husband: “that You sealed in our flesh” (*Shulchan Aruch HaRav* 187:7, *Mishna Berura* 187). I would like to add, that also single Jewish women have a share in the mitzvah of circumcision, by being born from a circumcised father and through their future husband. Moreover, one of the reasons women thank Hashem in the morning blessings for “having created me according to His will” is that, unlike men, women are created with a perfect body, without a foreskin blocking the light of our souls. Whereas, men are born with a coarse *klipah* – ‘peel’ – an extra piece which is not illuminated by the soul, a woman’s body has the potential to be completely pure, so that the soul can shine through. According to Kabbalah, women are receivers. This implies that we have the ability to receive a body completely in tune with Hashem’s will, whereas, men need to perfect their imperfect body by performing the action of circumcision.

### Woman’s Body is Naturally in Sync with the Divine

Before Avraham received the mitzvah of circumcision, his body wasn’t yet pure. Only by means of *brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision), would he become תמימים/*tamim* – ‘pure,’ perfect or wholehearted:

#### ספר בראשית פרק יז פסוק א

וְהָיָה אֲבֹרָם בֶּן תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה וְתִשְׁעִים שָׁנִים וַיֵּרָא הָשֵׁם אֶל אֲבֹרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי אֵל שְׁדֵי הַתְּהִלָּה לְפָנַי וְהָיָה תָמִים:

“Avram was ninety-nine years old when Hashem appeared to Avram, and He said to him, ‘I am the Almighty G-d (שְׁדַי/*Shadai*); walk before Me and be perfect’” (*Bereishit* 17:1).

Rashi explains that before circumcision, Avraham was lacking control over five of his organs: two eyes, two ears, and the male organ. Be’er Mayim Chayim adds that everything open needs guarding. Therefore, the eyes, the ears and the male organ are the first to sin. However, through circumcision, Hashem’s name protects them. The name שְׁדַי/*Shadai*, mentioned in connection with the very first reference to circumcision, is an acronym for שומר דלתות ישראל /*Shomer Delatot Yisrael* – ‘Guards the doors of Israel.’ Therefore, this name of G-d is written on the *mezuzah*, at the openings of our homes, to guard them. Through circumcision, the name Shadai is also ‘written’ on the male body to dwell upon man and protect him. The ש/*shin* watches the ears – שומע /*Shin shomea* – ‘the shin hears.’ This causes the rest of the limbs to

want to do good on their own... Before circumcision, the light of Hashem's holiness doesn't shine completely through the five vital openings of man, to cause them to desire to do Hashem's will with love. However, a woman's body does not require human intervention in order to be in sync with the Divine. Therefore, women do not have the same kind of lower sexual drive, that sends men to prostitutes. Neither do we have the desire for physical fights and bloodshed.

### Is a Woman Commanded to Circumcise Her Son?

**ספר בראשית פרק יז פסוק י' זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריך המול לכם כל זכר:**  
 "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between you and I, and with your descendants after you, circumcise all males" (*Bereishit* 17:10).

From this verse we learn the commandment to circumcise. The question remains whether a woman is commanded to circumcise her son, or whether she is even permitted to do so. We are familiar with how Tziporah saved Moshe's life, when the angel of death threatened to swallow him alive, since he delayed circumcising his son, Eliezer (*Shemot* 4:24-26 with Rashi). As soon as Tziporah took a sharp rock and cut her son's foreskin, the angel of death released Moshe. It is Tziporah's swiftness in performing the brit milah, that rectified Moshe's hesitation. Tziporah had to apply her own sense and judgment, in order to clearly discern what had to be done. There was no time to ask a Rabbi. There was also no time to send for a *mohel*. Historically, Jewish fathers and also mothers, have undergone great sacrifice, sometimes even risking death, to perform circumcisions on their sons and bring them into the covenant of Avraham. More than once in Jewish history, during times of persecution from the Greeks and Romans to the Nazis, rulers have recognized that circumcision is at the core of Jewish identity and have tried to ban it. Halacha highlights the essentialness of the mitzvah of circumcision. "It is a positive commandment for the father to circumcise his son. This commandment is greater than all the other positive commandments. If a father did not circumcise his son, Bet Din (the court) is obligated to circumcise him. And if the bet din did not circumcise him, he is obligated (when he becomes bar mitzvah) to circumcise himself. The mother is not obligated to circumcise her son (*Tur*) ([Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 260-261](#)). See the preliminary discussion in *Babylonian Talmud*, ([Kiddushin 29a](#)).

### Are Women Permitted to Become *Mohalot* (Circumcisers)?

No one reprimanded the Biblical Tziporah for performing circumcision on her son. On the contrary, it was considered a heroic, lifesaving act. Yet, the vocation of '*mohel*' is not condoned in the normative Torah world. For over 25 years, Rochelle Schwartz had provided non-ritual medical circumcision, as a family doctor, to many of her patients, when she came to Israel in 2007, to perform a ritual brit milah on a newborn boy. Rochelle, who belonged to a Reform synagogue, was one of three practicing female *mohalot* in Canada in 2007. She aspired to become a pioneer in changing the way people feel about brit milah in Israel. When reading about her, I wondered about the halachic view on female circumcisers. Actually, there are different opinions as to whether women are permitted to function as mohalot. This halachic debate dates back to medieval times. On the one hand, there are several acceptable halachic sources permitting female mohalot, while on the other hand, someone who is exempted from a mitzvah can't perform it on behalf of others. Moreover, allowing women to perform brit milah would be against the acceptable custom and tradition.

## Halachic Sources that Permit Women to Circumcise

Rambam permits women to circumcise, whenever no adult man is available, yet the *Shulchan Aruch* is undecided:

### רמב"ם יד החזקה - הלכות מילה פרק ב

(א) הכל כשרין למול ואפילו ערל ועבד ואשה וקטן מלין במקום שאין שם איש אבל עכו"ם לא ימול כלל...  
 "Circumcision may be performed by anyone. Even a person who is himself not circumcised, a slave, a woman, or a minor may perform the circumcision, if an adult male is not present. A gentile, however, should not be allowed to perform the circumcision at all" (Rambam, *Hilchot Milah* 2:1).

שו"ע יורה דעה - סימן רסד א) הכל כשרים למול; אפילו עבד אשה וקטן וערל ישראל שמתו אחיו מחמת מילה. ואם יש ישראל גדול שיודע למול, הוא קודם לכולם. (וי"א דאשה לו תמול) (סמ"ק והגהות מרדכי), (וכן נוהגין להדר אחר איש). אבל עובד כוכבים, אפילו הוא מהול, לא ימול כלל:

"Everyone is kosher to perform circumcision even a slave, a woman, a child and an uncircumcised Jew whose brother had died from circumcision. But if there is an adult male Jew that knows how to perform circumcision, he gets precedence over them all. And there are those who say that a woman does not circumcise – *סמק/והנהגות מרדכי Mordechai* – and this is our custom to perform the mitzvah in the highest way through a male[mohel] but an idol worshiper even if he is circumcised may never circumcise" (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 264:1).

## Only in Exceptional Extenuating Circumstances

In the Torah world, preserving the minhag of Israel is vital. "The custom of Israel is Torah" (Magen Avraham, *Orach Chaim* 307:16 and numerous additional Talmudic and Halachic sources). Therefore, in order to preserve the general minhag of Israel, I don't believe in encouraging women to become a mohelet. "If it was OK for Tziporah to circumcise her son, why should Jewish women not train for this, if they so wish?" is not an acceptable argument. In Tziporah's case, there were very exceptional extenuating circumstances that do not apply today. First of all, it was *פיקוח נפש/pikuach nefesh* – 'The principle in Jewish law that the preservation of human life overrides keeping every halacha including keeping Shabbat.' Secondly, there was no man available at the moment of Tziporah's lifesaving act. Today, there is no shortage of male mohelim in most Jewish communities. Therefore, a female mohelet is only needed in exceptional cases. If a Jewish mother finds herself the only adult Jew, alone with her 8-day-old son, and there is no man to perform the circumcision in time, then it would be a mitzvah for her to circumcise her son. Yet, it would be preferable to plan ahead and avoid being in such a situation. It is interesting to note that Tziporah used a rock, rather than the traditional knife to perform circumcision. Perhaps the reason for this was like Yael's using a tent peg rather than a sword to slay Sisero. The reason for this may be in order to make a point that it is neither a woman's job to kill, nor to *l'havdil* circumcise. Therefore, they used an inappropriate tool in order to highlight for future generations of women that their action was an exception to the rule.