



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Tazria 5771

By Dani Passow

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*Parshat Tazria* begins with the laws of circumcision: “When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male...on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.”<sup>1</sup> It’s striking how this child, made in the image of God, innocent and pure, is subject to such a radical “fixing” so soon after birth. A reference to circumcision in a *midrash* on *Parshat Tazria* sheds light on the meaning of this ritual:

Turnus Rufus the wicked asked Rabbi Akiva: “Whose deeds are better—Those of God or those of humans?” Rabbi Akiva answered, “Those of humans are better.”...Turnus Rufus asked, “Why do you circumcise yourselves?” [Rabbi Akiva] replied, “I knew you would ask me about that, which is why I pre-empted and told you that things made by humans are better than things made by God.” Rabbi Akiva then brought Turnus Rufus two items: stalks of wheat and baked rolls. Rabbi Akiva said: “These [the stalks of wheat] are the deeds of God, and these [the baked rolls] are the deeds of humans. Are these [baked rolls] not more beautiful?”<sup>2</sup>

Turnus Rufus’s initial question is audacious, surpassed in its daring only by Rabbi Akiva’s surprising answer. We would expect the great sage to laugh at the suggestion that the omnipotent and benevolent Master of the Universe can even be compared with earthly humans, who, we learn in Bereishit, are made from dust and will return to dust.<sup>3</sup> And yet, Rabbi Akiva’s almost blasphemous response dares to rank the work of humans higher than that of God. In his estimation, circumcision—the symbol of our covenant—acts as a bold reminder that God did not create a perfect world; rather, God left the world unfinished, inviting us to be partners in creation.

The original context of the first circumcision in Bereishit provides some indication that perhaps the boldness displayed by Rabbi Akiva is itself a central part of the covenant—a covenant that is not merely God’s charge to us to *complete* the world, but a Divine mandate to repair it, to seek what’s broken or unjust and right those wrongs. Immediately following the story of Avraham’s circumcision is the epic drama of Sodom and Gemorrah. God tells Avraham that God will destroy these cities because “their sin has become very grave.” Avraham famously challenges God: “To bring death upon the righteous along with the wicked...It shall be a sacrilege to you. Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?!”<sup>4</sup>

God never rebukes Avraham for his courageous challenge. In fact, God seems to have even invited Avraham to stand up for justice by rhetorically asking: “Shall I conceal from Avraham what I am about to do?”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, God explains the rationale for consulting Avraham in terms of the relationship they have forged through their covenant:

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<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 12:2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria 5.

<sup>3</sup> Bereishit 3:19.

<sup>4</sup> Bereishit 18:20, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 18:17.

"[Avraham] commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of God, doing charity and justice, in order that God may bring about for Avraham that which God had spoken."<sup>6</sup>

The circumcision covenant gave Avraham the right to challenge God and protest injustice. As children of Avraham, it is the covenant, then, that allows us to boldly declare God's world broken, to challenge the world as it is, and even to challenge God. But along with this right comes the responsibility to be soldiers of justice. Not only are we permitted to stand up for justice—even when it means challenging God—we are required to.

It has often struck me as odd that circumcision—such an intimate act—takes place as a public ceremony. Perhaps, though, circumcision needs to be a communal act. As we proclaim that this newborn, a seemingly pure creation of God, is in fact not whole, we assert that the world too is incomplete, and we are strengthened by our community to join together to partner with God to pursue justice and perfect creation.



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<sup>6</sup> Ibid 18: 19.

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