

Conversion and the Nature of Jewish Identity in the 21st Century Part Eight: The “Conversion” of the Tribe of Levi – Ramban Rabbi Jeffrey Fox - Rosh HaYeshiva and Dean of Faculty, Maharat

Previous post: [Part Seven: Keritut 9a, Rambam and the Tribe of Levi](#)

How did the tribe of Levi become Jewish? Circumcision is an essential part of the process of becoming Jewish for men. However, the tribe of Levi, as opposed to the rest of the Israelites in Egypt, were circumcised as babies. We are left the following question – can a circumcision for the sake of a Mitzvah (מילה לשם מצוה) serve as a circumcision for the sake of conversion (מילה לשם גיור)?

As we mentioned last time, Ramban offers two answers. His first, and more conventional approach, is that they simply removed a symbolic amount of blood and did not need a full circumcision (הטפת דם). However, Ramban goes on to offer a more interesting approach.

[Chidushei ha-Ramban, Yevamot 46a](#)

חידושי הרמב"ן יבמות דף מו:

And it appears to me that from the legal perspective of circumcision, they were not even obligated to remove a symbolic amount (להטיף) of blood for they have had already been circumcised.... Therefore, the tribe of Levi are to be judged as women and enter under the wings of the divine presence with [just] immersion, along with the circumcision they had [as babies].

ולי נראה דמדין מילה אינן חייבין להטיף דהא מלו... הילכך בני לוי נדונו כנשים להכנס בטבילה תחת כנפי השכינה עם המילה שלהם.¹

It turns out that a circumcision for the sake of a Mitzvah (מילה לשם מצוה) may serve as a circumcision for the sake of conversion (מילה לשם גיור). Ramban anticipates two possible challenges to this approach. The first challenge comes from other men who may have been circumcised. What about a non-Jew who was circumcised for some other reason? He says:

And this is not like an Arab or Givoni who was circumcised for since they were not commanded [by the Torah to do so] they are considered as though they are not circumcised. ולא דמו לערבי מהול וגבעוני מהול דהתם כיון דלא מפקדי כמאן דלא מהילי דמו

Ramban is emphasizing that only a circumcision done as a Mitzvah can stand in for a circumcision for the sake of conversion. If a non-Jewish child happened to have been circumcised in the hospital, that physical removal of the foreskin cannot serve as a conversion circumcision.

Ramban then asks about the descendants of Ketura, Avraham's third wife². The gemara in Sanhedrin (59b) asserts that the children of Ketura are obligated in circumcision. If that is the case, what would happen if a long-lost descendant of Ketura, who's family had been circumcising for centuries, showed up and wanted to convert. While this does seem a bit far-fetched, what Ramban has found is a case in which a non-Jew was doing circumcision as

¹ ע' הרמב"ן במלחמות, שבת דף נג: בדפי הרי"ף בסוף דבריו שם נד. הרב סולובייצ'יק מפלפל בדברו ברשימות ליבמות באות ז בקונטרס לענין גרות, עמ' תצן "ונראה".

² See [Bereitshit Rabba 61:4](#) for the debate as to whether Ketura was Hagar.

a Mitzvah. Therefore, according to his approach, they should be like the tribe of Levi and potentially not even need הטפה, a symbolic removal of blood, to complete their conversion.

ואם תשיבני בני קטורה? לא
[Subsequent generations were not obligated] only the
children on Avraham. And that is what Rashi explains in ' וכן פרש"י בפרק ד'
Sanhedrin (59b). מיתות (סנהדרין נט:)

Ultimately, the significance of Ramban's approach is that he allows for the possibility that a circumcision done for the sake of a Mitzvah (מילה לשם מצוה) can stand in for a circumcision that is needed for the sake of conversion (מילה לשם גיור). Ramban was not the first person to address the question of the Tribe of Levi, next week we will learn an earlier formulation of this question.

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