

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS.

GENESIS CHAPTER 17

VERSE TAKEN FROM “THE TANAKH. THE JEWISH BIBLE.”

TRADITIONAL JEWISH TEXT.

17:1...When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai.

This is the one time in Chapter 17 God is referred to as “the Lord.” (YHVH) It makes it clear that the name “El Shaddai”—a name for God whose definition no one knows—is the same God as YHVH.

In the modern period, some believe this name for God—Shaddai—appears to be related to the Hebrew word “shaddayim,” (breasts) and may refer to a feminine aspect of God. Given that half of the human race is female, it would be surprising if God had no feminine aspect. However, the notion that Shaddai comes from “shaddayim” is not borne out in the scholarly literature. The most persuasive definition is found in the Jewish Midrash...And what is the Midrash?

A form of the word *darash*, meaning “inquire” or “expound,” *midrash* is the rabbinic endeavor of mining the text of Tanach (the Hebrew Bible) to extract nuggets of hidden wisdom from its subterranean layers. This [distinguishes midrash from peshat](#), which seeks to determine the literal meaning of the text.

These midrashic texts can be divided into:

1. **Midrash Aggadah**—homiletic teachings, either extending the biblical narrative or providing parables with moral lessons.
2. **Midrash Halachah**—deriving further details of Jewish law from the biblical text.

The Midrash divides the word Shaddai into “sheh-dai,” meaning “it is enough/sufficient.” That is, “God (El) is the Sufficient One.”

17:1 (Cont.) ...Walk in My ways and be blameless.

The term “blameless” (tamim) is the same term the Torah used to describe Noah. (Genesis 6:9) Its most accurate translation is “without blemish.” (Leviticus 1:3 and 1:10)

17:2...I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.”

17:3...Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further,

17:4...” As for me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

Every few years, God returns to Abram and makes the same promise. God, it seems, delays the fulfillment of His promise as a test of Abram’s faith, specifically as part of what will constitute the final and greatest test of Abram’s faith.

By making him wait so long for a son with Sarai, it will be all the more difficult for Abram (Abraham, as he will then be known) to offer up this long-awaited child on an altar to God. (Chapter 22)

What “multitude of nations” will Abram be the father of? At a minimum, Abram will be the father of the Israelite nation through Issac, nations that emanate from Ishmael, and nations descending from his second wife, Keturah. (Genesis 25:1-4)

17:5...And you shall no longer be called Abram but, your name shall be Abraham, for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.

In the ancient world, a change of name signified an event of immense importance. It still does. A Roman Catholic cardinal, for example, takes a new name when elected pope. Similarly, when a non-Jew becomes a Jew, he or she receives a new name.

In this verse, when nothing is working out according to the covenantal promise, God changes Abram’s name to serve as a sign that something major is about to happen. His new name in Hebrew is “Avraham.” The “ham” may be related to the Hebrew word for “many.” (hamon) His new name would then be “Father (av) of many.”

17:6...I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you.

THE COVENANT: JEWS ARE TO KEEP GOD ALIVE IN THE WORLD AND GOD IS TO KEEP THE JEWS ALIVE.

17:7...I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come,

The covenant between God and the people, who ultimately came to be known as Jews, stipulates that it is God's task to keep the Jews alive in the world. And it is the Jews task to keep knowledge of God alive in the world: "You are My witnesses, declares the Lord." (Isaiah 43:10)

Making God and His moral demands of the human beings known as non-Jews was regarded by the Rabbi's as equal in significance to promoting knowledge and practice of the commandments among Jews.

The fact is; however, the Jews survival and the Jews mission are inextricably linked. Only when Jews bring the world to God and His moral code—beginning with the Ten Commandments and/or the Seven Noahide Laws—will the world become decent. And only in a decent world will Jew-hatred and the killing of Jews (and others) end.

17:7 (Cont.) ...as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come.

The promise of an "everlasting covenant throughout the ages," we can see from our modern-day vantage point, has been quite accurate. The Jews are the only intact people/culture/language/religion from the ancient world. There remain a number of ancient people, but none speak the same language and practice the same religion as they did in ancient times. Abba Eban, Israel's Foreign Minister from 1966 to 1974, is quoted as saying, "Israel is the only nation whose citizens live on the same land, speak the same language and practice the same religion as their ancestors did 3,000 years ago."

17:8...I assign the land you sojourn in, to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God.”

Although in this verse God pledges to be the God of Abraham's descendants, He is also the God of the entire world. The God of the Torah has always been universal. That is why the Torah begins with the creation of the world, not with the creation of the Jews. In addition, God revealed himself to Adam and to Noah before there were any Jews. God promised to bless all the nations of the world through him. And God appeared in the form of an angel to an Egyptian woman in the desert. (Genesis 16:7-13)

The Jews introduced the God of all the world, not the God of the Jews alone, to the world. Therefore, no one need become a Jew to accept the God, wisdom, or values of the Torah.

There are those who mock Jews and Christians who believe God promised the Land of Israel to the Jewish people. But, as noted, even an atheist would have to acknowledge no other people ever established a state there—as Jews have three times—or have claimed it as their own dating back 3,000 years.

17:9...God further said to Abraham, “As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant.

***THE CASE FOR—AND MEANING OF—JEWISH
CIRCUMCISION.***

17:10...Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised.

Many ancient cultures had rites of circumcision. What rendered the Torah's rite completely different was it did not constitute a rite of passage—the nature of circumcision in all other cultures—but a physical expression of a covenant between God and His people.

The commandment of circumcision applies only to males. It thereby implicitly bans female circumcision; a horror still practiced in other parts of the world.

This event in Judaism is called a “bris” – or “brit milah,” “covenant of circumcision,” to give it its full name. The “brit” uniquely strengthens a Jew's religious identification, and the ceremony instills in the family and in the community present at the ceremony a profound identification with almost four millennia of the Jews' unparalleled history.

17:11...You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin,

Abraham at the age of ninety-nine was circumcised to enter into this covenant with God.

17:11 (Cont.) ...and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Just as the physical Land of Israel is a sign of the covenant between God and the Jews, so is the physical act of circumcision. “The ineradicable

nature of circumcision symbolizes the enduring, irrevocable nature of the covenant.” (Rabbi Sarna)

As noted previously, the Torah is as concerned with the physical as it is with the spiritual. Since we live in a physical world, the physical can and does have a profound impact on the spiritual.

17:12...And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days.

Circumcision is not a right of manhood. It is a permanent reminder to the Jewish male (and his wife) that he and she are members of a covenantal people. And it is a communal event for everyone who celebrates the entrance of a male Jewish infant into the covenant with God.

By being performed on the eighth day, circumcision symbolizes man’s part in creation. God created for six days and rested on the seventh; on the eight day, we humans took over.

17:12 (Cont.) ...As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not your offspring,

17:13...they must be circumcised, homeborn and purchased alike. Thus, shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact.

Even the non-Jew who became enslaved or indentured servant was to be circumcised. While this did not render him fully a Jew, it elevated his status—he, too, was to be regarded as a participant in the covenant. For

example, he was given the Sabbath day for rest—a law that did not apply to any other of the enslaved until modern times—and participated in sharing the Passover sacrifice.

7:14...And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant.”

The failure to perform circumcision on a Jewish boy has always been regarded by Jews as a statement that one does not wish to be part of the covenant. Circumcision is one of only two positive commandments for which the Torah ordains the punishment of “karet,” being “cut off” from one’s kin. The other is failure to bring the Passover sacrifice. (Numbers 9:13)

No one is sure what the punishment of “karet,” (cut off) precisely entailed. We know it is not the death penalty. Excommunication? Cut off in the afterlife? God cutting off years from a person’s life? The Torah never explains it. However, it is commonly accepted that a Jew who chooses not to circumcise his or her son has, deliberately or not, “cut off” that child from the Jewish people.

17:15...And God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah.

As Sarai, along with Abraham, played a critical role in the process of creating the Jewish people, she, too, merited a change of name. Her importance was so great, she was the only woman in the Torah to have her name changed.

17:16...I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her.”

Now, finally, God names Sarah as the mother of the Israelite people. Had God done this earlier, would Sarah have produced the idea of Abraham having a child through Hagar?

17:17...Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed,

Abraham was so intimate with God that he was able to laugh in response to God’s pronouncement. When God is real to us we should be able to laugh with Him, get angry at Him, (see, Psalm 44:12, “You hand us over like sheep to be devoured”) and challenge Him. (Genesis 18:25: “Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?”)

Sarah, too, will laugh when she hears the news that they are to have a child together. (Genesis 18:12)

WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

17:17 (Cont.) ...as he said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?”

Under normal circumstances, Abraham and Sarah would be far too old to have a child. The Jews became a nation through divine intervention—a miracle.

Many moderns do not believe in miracles. But a miracle is nothing more than a suspension of a natural law. Now, if one denies the existence of the

Creator—the Creator of natural laws—clearly, those laws can never be suspended. But that person has no explanation for how nature and its laws ever came about. That the world created itself from nothing hardly seems more rationally tenable than the existence of a Creator. And if there is a Creator of nature, this Being has the power to manipulate it. That is all a miracle is.

17:18...And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live by your favor!”

Even though Abraham is told that he is going to have a different child with Sarah, he still cares about Ishmael. He does not forget his first son, just as God did not forget Hagar in the wilderness.

17:19...God said, “Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son,

When Abraham brings up Ishmael’s name, God reiterates this is not the son through whom the covenant will be maintained.

For reasons not made clear, Abraham did not share this prophecy with Sarah. (Genesis 18:10-12) Similarly, down the road, the wife of this very son, Rebecca, will not share her prophetic vision about the destinies of their twin sons, Jacob and Esau, with her husband. (Genesis 25:23)

17:19 (Cont.) ...and you shall name him Isaac.

In Hebrew, the name is Yitzchak, which means “laugh” in both biblical and modern Hebrew. God has a sense of humor. Given that Abraham laughed when told he and Sarah would conceive at their age, God decided

to name their child “Laugh.” In effect, God is saying, “You and Sarah may laugh but, I will have the last laugh.”

17:19 (Cont.) ...and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come.

The covenant will be through Isaac, not Ishmael.

17:20...As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation.

17:21...But my covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.”

In case 17:19 was not clear, God made it explicit: the covenant is solely through Isaac.

17:22...And when He was done speaking with him, God was gone from Abraham.

17:23...Then Abraham took his son Ishmael, and all his homeborn slaves and all those he had bought, every male in Abraham’s household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins on that very day, as God had spoken to him.

Even though the covenant is through Isaac, Abraham circumcised Ishmael. The reason is not that Ishmael was to be a member of the covenantal people. God has just made it clear that he was not. But he was

part of Abraham's household, all of whom—verse 27—were to be circumcised in keeping with God's instruction in verses 12-13.

17:24...Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin.

17:25...and his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

17:26...Thus Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day,

17:27...and all his household, his homeborn slaves and those that had been bought from outsiders, were circumcised with him.

Genesis 17: Covenant and Circumcision

A Turning Point in Abraham's Story

Genesis chapter 17 marks a significant moment in the narrative of Abraham. God reiterates His promise to Abraham, emphasizing the importance of Isaac as the child through whom the covenant will be established. While Ishmael is blessed and will become the father of twelve chieftains, God's covenant is uniquely tied to Isaac, who will be born to Sarah within the year.

In obedience to God's command, Abraham circumcises not only himself but also his son Ishmael, all his household, and all those he had acquired. This act signifies Abraham's commitment to God's instructions and sets a precedent for all future generations. Although the covenant is exclusive to Isaac's line, circumcision becomes a universal sign for those in Abraham's household, reflecting both faith and obedience.

The chapter closes with a sense of fulfillment and anticipation. Abraham, at ninety-nine years of age, takes decisive steps in response to God's directives, and Ishmael, at thirteen, joins him in this rite. All members of the household participate, underscoring the collective nature of the commandment and the unity of Abraham's community under God's guidance.