



# GROWTH

## At The SHABBAT TABLE

### PARSHAT TAZRIA – METZORA

#### The Lesson of Shammai

The start of this week's Parsha mentions the commandment of circumcision. Interestingly enough, this is one of the only *mitzvot* that is referred to as "*brit*," a covenant. This sparks a puzzling question: how is something that is supposed to resemble a covenant or attachment achieved through cutting, a symbolic act of separation and detachment? Intuitively, one would expect the opposite; shouldn't a covenant be marked with some action that represents attachment?

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 31) recounts the well-known episode of a gentile who approached Shammai and requested to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot. The Gemara describes Shammai's response as דחפו באמת הבניין — he pushed him away with his measuring stick. The individual then went to Hillel, who replied, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entirety of the Torah; the rest is commentary."

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, of blessed memory, raised an obvious difficulty [1]. Shammai himself teaches in *Pirkei Avot* (1:15) that one should receive every person with a pleasant countenance — with warmth and dignity. Even if he considered the request unserious or impossible, why not respond calmly and respectfully? Why was such a sharp reaction necessary?

In his characteristic and insightful manner, the Rebbe smiled and remarked, "Since Shammai himself teaches that we must receive every person with a pleasant countenance, we must extend that same courtesy to Shammai — and consider that perhaps there is something deeper behind his response." He explained: perhaps, Shammai was not rejecting the individual but rather imparting a foundational lesson that was essential to entering Jewish life. The two primary principles of the Torah are "I am Hashem your G-d," and "You shall have no other gods." These correspond to the dual framework of סור מרע ועשה טוב — both turning away from that which is wrong and embracing that which is good.

A common misconception is that religious life is defined primarily by what one affirms. In truth, every meaningful "yes" is predicated upon a prior "no." To say yes to a relationship is to say no to anything that compromises it. To say yes to a life of health with nutrition and exercise is to reject behaviors that undermine it. There can be no genuine attachment without boundaries; no enduring relationship without the capacity for restraint and exclusion.

Shammai, who personified the attribute of *gevurah* — discipline, strength, and exactness — communicated this principle through action. His "measuring stick" was itself the message: a person must possess a standard by which to evaluate whether something belongs in his life. אמת הבניין — does this contribute to constructive growth, or does it erode one's integrity? Before one can fully embrace Torah, one must cultivate the clarity and resolve to reject that which is incompatible with it.

In this sense, Shammai's response was not a dismissal, but an initiation. He conveyed, without words, that entry into Judaism requires courage, consistency, and the willingness to draw firm boundaries. Only once this foundation of סור מרע was established could the individual proceed to Hillel, who embodied *chesed*, and be taught the complementary dimension of love, connection, and עשה טוב.

With this framework, we can return to our original question. The verse (*Gen. 15:18*) states that "Hashem cut a covenant with Avraham." *HaKtav VeHaKabbalah* [2] explains that the term *brit* is etymologically related to *breirah* — to choose. A covenant, by definition, is an exclusive bond. When two parties enter into a covenant, they distinguish that relationship from all others; it is defined not only by connection, but by the exclusion of alternatives.

Accordingly, the "cutting" of the covenant is not incidental — it is essential. Through the act of separation, the relationship is defined and preserved. The covenant between Hashem and His people is forged precisely through this dynamic: we are set apart in order to be bound.

Thus, when we inscribe this sign of the covenant upon a child at the very beginning of life — through an act of removal — we affirm a profound truth. Our connection to Hashem is not generic or incidental; it is deliberate, exclusive, and enduring. It is precisely through separation that the deepest form of attachment is achieved.

[1] Shared by R' YY Jacobson

[2] Quoted in "Motivated by the Maggid" by R' Paysach Krohn, p. 121

"Blessed are those who can give without remembering and receive without forgetting."