

English 450: Daily Themes
Professor Bill Deresiewicz

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By Isaac Selya

When Yekhiel was eight days old, they botched his circumcision. The Mohel, an elderly Rabbi with failing eyesight and shaky hands, joked “They usually don’t cry this much. The boy shall be a cantor, crying out to God for his people.” Peering through hazy cataracts, he continued “They usually don’t bleed this much either. He will truly give of himself for the Jewish people.”

Yekhiel stained three white prayer shawls red before his father took him to the non-Jewish surgeon in the nearest town. The surgeon saved his life, but Yekhiel returned to the shtetl with a wickless candle.

As Yekhiel grew up and entered the Yeshiva, no one spoke about his misfortune, although everyone knew. They would greet him with sympathetic looks and treat him with the kindness that Leviticus demands for the unfortunate. He was a stellar student in the Yeshiva, and when he was 20, his intellect and piety gleaned him a pretty young wife, a daughter of the illustrious Rabbi Soloveitchik. The day after the engagement, his father sat him down. He stroked his beard and cleared his throat.

“Yekhiel...” he began, looking at his hands. “There is something I need to tell you before your wedding day.”

Sensing his father’s discomfort, Yekhiel assumed his father was going to tell him about the laws of marital relations, a discussion that always included the nuts and bolts of sexual intercourse.

“It is all right, Abba. I already learned the laws pertaining to the commandment to be fruitful and multiply...”

“No Yekhiel. I know you are learned, both in Torah and science. But I must tell you that... that things may be different for you. When you were eight days old, the mohel... he slipped.”

Yekhiel stared at his father, expecting him to say something else. He said nothing, focusing on the ground. When he raised his eyes to meet his son’s gaze, he burst into tears.

For three days, Yekhiel lay in bed. He did not eat. He did not pray or study. The morning of the fourth day, he went to see Rabbi Eliezer.

“Rabbi. Why did God give us the circumcision?”

Eliezer rocked back and forth for a minute, deep in meditation.

“Yekhiel. Before the holy one, blessed be he, made man, the only beings were angels. Winged angels. The angels kept the Torah to every last stricture. All day they would sit in their Yeshiva in heaven and debate the meaning of every letter of the Torah. But God realized that the Torah was useless to angels, for it didn't improve them. They had no limitations to overcome. No evil inclination to curb. Only an imperfect being could benefit from the purifying force of the Torah, just as a scalding fire separates slag from precious metals. So he took an angel, and he clipped his wings, and made man.”