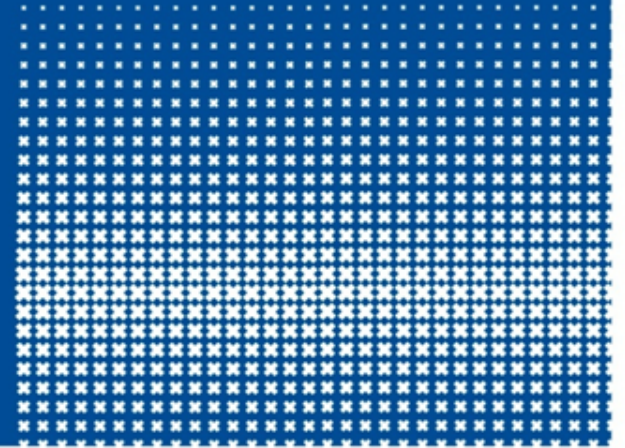




Tamás Biró

SBL, Amsterdam, July 23, 2012



May I circumcise myself?

On rituals and “halakhically incorrect” cognition
in midrashic exegesis

May I circumcise myself?

- *Le-maase*: obviously irrelevant question.
- Importance:
 - Theoretical construct of a mitzvah
 - Exegesis of the *Niphal* forms in Gen 17:

Who circumcised Abraham?

May I circumcise myself?

- Importance: exegesis the *Niphal* forms in Gen 17

Who circumcised Abraham?

(י-יד) זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו. [...] המול לכם כל זכר: ונמלתם את

בשר ערלתכם [...]: וכן שמנת ימים ימול לכם כל זכר [...]:

המול ימול [...]: וערל זכר אשר לא ימול את בשר ערלתו [...]:

(כד) ואברהם בן תשעים ותשע שנה בהמלו בשר ערלתו:

(כו) בעצם היום הזה נמול אברהם וישמעאל בנו:

Our methodological approach

- Cognitive science of religion
 - Beliefs, narratives, rituals, etc. encoded in the brain.
 - Religious phenomena constrained by encoding.
 - Phenomena observed → models of encoding → phenomena explained.

- Ongoing project: “The Jewish Mind: Jewish rituals and the cognitive science of religion”

Overview: applying this methodology in the context of midrash studies

- Phenomenon observed:
 - Texts: midrashic, halakhic, non-rabbinic.
- Models of encoding:
 - Lawson and McCauley; Whitehouse.
- Phenomenon explained:
 - A first attempt to a “psycho-historical” approach.

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Tanhuma (Warsaw ed., *Lekh Lekha* 17)

והיה יושב אברהם ותמה היאך ימול כיון שאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך מה כתיב אחריו ויפל אברהם על פניו כיון שנפל על פניו רמז הקדוש ברוך הוא לאותו מקום ועקצו עקרב ונמצא מהול, מנין הן מה שכתוב וידבר אתו אלהים לאמר אני הנה בריתי אתך הרי אתה מהול, וכתיב בעצם היום הזה נמול אברהם, מל לא נאמר אלא נמול

[...] כך אברהם כשאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא ואתנה בריתי ביני ובינך נתבייש ונפל על פניו, בנפילתו נמצא שהוא מהול, אמר לו הנה בריתי אתך ...

Annan ben David: Book of Precepts

(L. Nemoy: *Karaite Anthology*, p. 20; but cf. Harkavy's edition, pp. 78-79)

- A man must be circumcised by another man and may not circumcise himself with his own hand, since Scripture says: *And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin* (Gen 17:11). Were the meaning to be that a man may circumcise himself with his own hand, it would have been written, “And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin”; the wording *And ye shall be circumcised* indicates therefore that someone else must circumcise him.

Abraham circumcised himself: Gen. Rab. (Vilna) Vayeira 48:4-5

(ד) רבי יצחק פתח מזבח אדמה תעשה לי וגו', א"ר יצחק מה אם זה שבנה מזבח לשמי הריני נגלה עליו ומברכו, **אברהם שמל עצמו** לשמי על אחת כמה וכמה, וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא.

(ה) רבי לוי פתח (ויקרא ט) ושור ואיל לשלמים לזבוח לפני ה', אמר מה אם זה שהקריב שור ואיל לשמי הריני נגלה עליו ומברכו, **אברהם שמל עצמו** לשמי עאכ"ו, וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא.

NB: Same idea also in Tanhuma (Warsaw ed.) *Vayeira* 2.

An uncircumcised adult must circumcise himself: Mekhilta

- מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בא - מסכתא דפסחא פרשה יח

והרי המילה תוכיח שאינה שקולה כנגד הכל ואם לא מלו
אביו הוא מל את עצמו

Maimonides: Mishneh Torah, *Milah* 1:2

- 1:2

...כשיגדל הוא חייב למול את עצמו...

- 2:1

הכל כשרין למול ואפילו ערל ועבד א ואשה וקטן מלין
במקום שאין שם איש, אבל עכו"ם לא ימול כלל ואם מל
אינו צריך לחזור ולמול ב שנייה,

Observed phenomena – summary

Self-circumcision

- Halakhic sources (the case of an uncircumcised adult):
 - “Standard” halakhic sources: ok
 - Annan ben David: not ok
- Exegesis (Abraham’s circumcision):
 - Standard understanding/earlier sources: ok
 - Tanhuma: not ok

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How are rituals encoded in the mind?

- Ritual = action with a twist.
- Actions have:
 - Agent: wilful initiator of the action.
 - Patient: passively undergoing the action.
 - Instrument: contributing to the result of the action without will.
 - Etc.

Linguistics: roles (agent, patient, instrument) vs. syntactic positions (subject, object, etc.)

- (1) John broke the window with the hammer.
- (2) John broke the window.
- (3) The hammer broke the window.
- (4) The window was broken.
- (5) The window was broken by John.
- (6) The window was broken by the hammer.
- (7) The window was broken with the hammer.
- (8) * The window was broken with John.

Circumcision

- Action, with roles:
 - Agent: the performing circumcision
 - Patient: person undergoing circumcision
 - Instrument: knife

Rituals: actions, with a twist

- Twist, according to Lawson and McCauley:
 - one of the roles filled by (CP) superhuman agent, or
 - one of the roles filled by entity previously enabled by (CP) superhuman agent.

Hence, fulfilling the mind's need for religious arousal.

Circumcision

- Action, with roles:
 - Agent: the performing circumcision
 - Patient: person undergoing circumcision
 - Instrument: knife

Where is (CP) superhuman agent?

Rituals: actions, with a twist

- Twist, according to Lawson and McCauley:
 - one of the roles filled by (CP) superhuman agent, or
 - one of the roles filled by entity previously enabled by (CP) superhuman agent.
 - + Biró's ongoing project: additional factors.

Hence, fulfilling the mind's need for religious arousal.

McCauley-Lawson theory, combined with Whitehouse's *modes of religiosity*

- Rituals with superhumans in agent role:
contributes amply to the mind's need for religious arousal.
- Rituals with superhumans in other roles:
contributes scarcely to the mind's need for religious arousal.
- Actions without superhumans involved:
does not contribute to the mind's need for religious arousal.
- The mind's need not sufficiently fulfilled:
remedy dynamics (e.g., charismatic splinter groups).

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Roles in Self-circumcision

- Agent = patient.
- Hence, no way to include superhuman.
- the human mind's need for “religious arousal” is not satisfied.
- Need for remedy.

Remedy: chain of circumcisions

- “The circumcised must circumcise”:
 - Agent = patient of a previous (enabling) ritual
 - Chain, thus, going back to...
 - ... first circumcision, where G. was involved.
 - But who circumcised Abraham?
 - Himself? No superhuman in mental encoding.
 - Thus, halakhah meets exegesis.

Remedy: chain of circumcisions

- “The circumcised must circumcise”:
 - Who circumcised Abraham?
 - Himself? No superhuman in mental encoding.
 - Circumcised by superhuman agent,
 - via miracle – *that is the Tanhuma’s solution!*
 - Thus, current circumcisions also involve superhuman!

Theologically correct vs. intuitive religiosity

- Standard halakhic texts:
 - Highly intellectual constructs. “Doctrinal mode”.
- Other texts: closer to “imagistic mode”.
 - Midrashic texts: more space for intuitive religiosity, and hence, for “remedy techniques”.
 - Splinter-groups: typical “remedy techniques”.

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Summary: applying this methodology in the context of midrash studies

- Phenomenon observed: divergent approaches to self-circumcision in halakhic and exegetical sources.
- Models of encoding: Lawson&McCauley; Whitehouse.
 - Self-circ doesn't satisfy mind's need for religious arousal.
- Phenomenon explained:
 - Various texts correspond to remedy techniques.

Summary: role played by cognitive science of religion in biblical and Jewish studies

- Phenomenon observed: CSR raises new question
 - Attention to agent/patient/instrument roles.
- Models of encoding: biblical and Jewish studies can help refine CSR theories (see ongoing project).
- Phenomenon explained: CSR theories can help formulate new (types of) explanations in biblical and Jewish studies, *complementing* previous approaches.



Thank you for your attention!

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