

In Genesis chapter 12: 1-3 God made a covenant with Abram (Abraham).

The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

This is known as the Abrahamic Covenant. The idea of a covenant relationship in itself was not something new at the time of Abram since the making of covenants was popular in the ancient world, for example, covenants made between kings and their subjects. Covenants were made for a variety of reasons, including for strength, protection or to keep a people in submission.

The Abrahamic covenant was initiated by the authority of the word of God and was a promise to establish the Abram and his descendants within the protection of God. Abram was asked to leave his home and family, then God would make three promises: Abram would be the father of a great nation; would have numerous descendants, and would be given a land to live in. Abram was chosen by God because, according to Genesis 17:1, he was considered to be 'blameless' amongst those in his generation.

Abram and his descendants would establish a nation which would be an example to the world that God was the one and only all-powerful God, whom people should follow and worship. By accepting the terms of the covenant, the relationship between the Jewish people and God was established. As a result of his faith, God changed Abram's name to Abraham, meaning 'the father of many': 'No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.' (Genesis 17:5)

According to the Torah, Abraham was commanded by God to circumcise himself, all the male members of his household, as well as all of his descendants. This, according to the book of Genesis, was to be a sign of the covenant relationship between God and the 'chosen people', 'This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.' (Genesis 17:9-11)

The ritual of circumcision was already widely practised in the ancient Near East, however, Abraham was given a specific reason for carrying it out; that is, circumcision was an outward, physical sign in the flesh of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, and was the first commandment specific to the Jews. The Torah also says that: 'Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.' (Genesis 17:14) Abraham did as required, and he himself was circumcised at the age of ninety-nine years old (Genesis 17:24).

The ceremony of brit milah is still practised amongst Jews today, and is an important event for the family of a Jewish son as it gives them the feeling of being linked in a long chain reaching all the way back to Abraham. Brit milah also has greater significance for Jews than just being merely a physical operation. For many Jews it is seen as the act which makes one a member of the Jewish community. Indeed, such is its importance that not carrying out this particular term of the covenant would signify in some forms of Judaism that the un-circumcised would no longer be considered to be part of the covenant community.