

Milah Books & Manuals

by Eliezer Brodt & Ish Sefer

Much has been written on milah. Hebrew Books has over forty seforim on this topic. There are those books that discuss the various controversies, including abolishing milah in toto[1] or specific parts of milah such as *metzizah be-peh*. [2] Others focus on the philosophic and theological implications of milah. [3] This post, however, will focus on two types of milah books, one what we will refer to as milah manuals and the second, books about milah. The former is comprised of books that explain, in detail, the process of milah - these can include the physical process, i.e. how the surgery is to take place, as well as the more esoteric processes such as thoughts or prayers that are to accompany the milah. The second type of book doesn't focus on the technical aspects of milah but instead focuses on the customs, the laws, etc. that are connected with the surgery. One final point, this is not intended to be a complete bibliography of either type of work, instead, we have picked out a few titles that hopefully will be of interest to the readers.

Milah Manuals

The first manual up for discussion is R. Tzvi Benyamin Auerbach's, *Brit Avraham*, Frankfurt, 1860. This book includes a nice introduction dealing with a history of the Ravan as well as other Rishonim. Additionally, all the liturgy associated with brit and explanations of the liturgy is included. There is a section on the laws relating to *milah*. At the beginning of this section, Auerbach notes that although he takes a different view of some of rules governing milah, he provides explanations for his divergent opinions in another section. Indeed, Auerbach does provide a detailed discussion of the law of milah including a discussion of most, if not all, relevant opinions. Interestingly, although the laws and liturgy are in Hebrew, this section, the section discussing the bases for Auerbach's opinions, is in German. Not only is it in German, but in Latin characters indicating that Auerbach was trying to demonstrate the correctness of his opinion to only those who could read German. Let us explain. Auerbach's work includes one other section in the vernacular. That section discusses various cures associated with milah. This section is written in Yiddish in Hebrew characters. Auerbach explains that he did so "so that even those who do not understand Hebrew will understand this section." Thus, there are three potential audiences for this book. Those who only understand Yiddish, those who understand Hebrew, and finally, those who understand German as well.

R. Auerbach is most well-known for another work, *Sefer ha-Eshkol* he edited and published from a manuscript and added his own commentary, *Nahal Eshkol*. As Dr. Shapiro has discussed, this work was accused of being a forgery, that although it was attributed to Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac, a Rishon, it was in fact a later invention. Ironically, in the introduction to *Brit Avraham* (pp. 24-25), Auerbach discusses the importance of authenticating manuscripts and ensuring proper attribution. Specifically, Auerbach provides Brother, the following story illustrates how much care and time one must take in authenticating old manuscripts that are found in various libraries. In fact, Gedolei Yisrael have erred because they failed to take proper care [in authenticating manuscripts] when it came to the prohibition of *terafot*.

Auerbach offers the story that when he was studying under R. Leib Karlburg, R. Karlburg ruled that an animal was not a *terifah* which appeared to be in contravention with the understood law. Auerbach questioned him on this ruling and R. Karlburg explained that all the Rabbis in Cologne and Bonn permit this because of a responsum authored in 1626 and signed by numerous rabbis that remained in manuscript but was included in the communal pinkas from R. Yehuda Miller's library. Auerbach went and looked this up, and indeed there

was such a responsum attributed to various Rabbis. Auerbach, however, wrote to his father-in-law, an expert in *yoreh deah*, regarding this leniency, and his father-in-law told him to ignore it and follow the accepted stricter position.

Auerbach continues, that after he got to Frankfort, he told R. Aaron Fuld this story and R. Fuld immediately showed Auerbach a responsum from R. Mordechai Halberstatt, *Ma'amar Mordechai*. R. Halberstatt published the responsum (as well as other manuscripts from R. Miller's library) and after doing so states "all of the preceding manuscripts are forgeries and the product of the doer of a terrible deed, may his name be blotted out, Lieb the non Jew who is the well-known informer Kreski (this wicked one is referred to in the book *Ametz Yosef* as the informer Krauss . . .) . . . he is the one who forged and spoke falsehoods in the names of various luminaries." Auerbach then finishes "that I have spoken at length [regarding the need for caution authenticating manuscripts] because there is still a community who follows the [erroneous] practice regarding the above issue of *terifah*." Ironically, one of the justifications for Auerbach publishing a forgery was that Auerbach was duped regarding the manuscript and failed to do correctly authenticate the manuscript he attributed to the *Sefer ha-Eshkol*.^[4]

The next two manuals are interesting in both their content as well as their titles. These two manuals are more focused on the kabbalistic intent that one is to have during the ceremony. *Sod ha-Shem* has already been discussed here and here due to the fact the author, R. David Lida, has been accused of being a Sabbatian. But, it should also be noted that both *Sod ha-Shem* and *Hotem ha-Shem* use God's name in the titles. Indeed, in the later case, God's full name is spelled out - Yud, Hey, Vav, Hey (additionally, most of what is in *Hotem ha-Shem* comes from *Sod ha-Shem*).

Such use of God's name is not unique to these books. The first to discuss the issue of using God's name in the title actually arose not because the book in question had God's name but rather because the title *could* be (incorrectly) read to be referring to God. Of course, we speak of Hezekiyah Medini's *Sedi Hemed*. The *Sedi Hemed* was not published in a single set as it is available today. Instead, R. Medini sent *kuntresim* in paperback as the parts became available to various rabbis to get their opinions on the work. Although much of the feedback R. Medini got was positive, R. Medini received two letters from a rabbi R. Medini does not identify that questioned R. Medini's work and more particularly, the title of his work. These letters complained that since the *Sedi Hemed* had a paper cover with the title on it, when one went to bind all the *kuntresim* together, the binder would inevitably remove one cover. According to the anonymous rabbi this was problematic because *Sedi* also spells out a name of god and thus opens the potential for discarding of a page with god's name on it.

R. Medini responded by noting that since the word in question "*sed*" is not intended to be holy, although the same word may also have a holy connotation, whether it is in fact holy is dependent upon the intent of the author (i.e. *elohim* referring to idols). Here, the intent was not god's name so there is no problem. R. Medini also noted that of the many, many rabbis who wrote to him regarding his book, none had refrained from mentioning the title and none brought this "issue" to his attention. R. Medini then cataloged a few books that, like the *Sod ha-Shem* and *Hotem ha-Shem*, have god's actual name in the title and none of these authors were at all bothered by that. Indeed, it seems rather odd to worry about a book title, when the entire book is to be respected. R. Medini then wrote to numerous rabbis to check and make certain that his logic was sound (they all responded that R. Medini was correct). The first he wrote to was the extremely erudite scholar, R. Yosef Zekhariah Stern. R. Stern agreed with R. Medini and offered additional titles that contain god's name. Additionally, R. Stern also

highlighted names that include god's name in them such as eliyahu, eliezer, daniel and the like. R. Stern proclaims that although these names contain god's name in them no one has ever had a problem with them nor did he ever see anyone hyphenate or otherwise alter the name to ensure that god's name doesn't appear. Today, however, the very practice that R. Stern notes was never done, has become commonplace in some quarters. In the end, R. Medini's work retained the title *Sedi Hemed*; however, the title now carries *nekkudot* to ensure that no one makes a mistake regarding the pronunciation.

In 1892, *Zichron Brit li-Rishonim* was printed. Although published in the end of the nineteenth century, this manual is based on the *pesakim* of the rishonim R. Yakov ha-Gozer and his sons. Israel Ta-Shma points out that this is the first specialist sefer written in times of Rishonim where we do not know anything about them in others areas of torah (as there were other specialist seforim written before but by well-known gedolim). Additionally, Ta-Shma demonstrates that this work was meant for the Moheleim of the time to improve the field. See I. Ta-Shma, *Keneset Mechkarim, Iyunei be-Safrut ha-Rabbanim be-yemi ha-Benyaim*, (Bialik Institute, Jerusalem: 2004), vol. I, pp. 320-22; *idem*, *Halakha, Minhag, u-Metziut be-Ashkenaz 1100-1350*, (Magnes Press, Jerusalem: 1996), pp. 96-99

The question is why the name "ha-Gozer." R. Yissacar Tamar in *Alei Tamar* [Moed 1:149]; has a lengthy piece on the topic where he points out there are almost no sources in chazal that "gozer" refers to a mohel. He suggests that maybe the editor stuck it in. R. Tamar then suggests that perhaps the name "gozer" has nothing to do with Milah. Instead, it was a nickname of respect that he was a Tzadik and what he was *gozer* hashem did. [See also R. Elijah Levita, *Tishbi*, s.v. *gezeriah*.] However it appears that Alei Tamar missed a known Midrash which provides:

שבעה הרי שמונה, אמר משה בזכות המילה שניתנה לשמונה נקרע הים, ונקלס באז. אמר ר' לוי לגוזר ים סוף לגזרים (תהלים קלו יג), שכן בלשון ארמי קורין למהולין גזורים, בזכות המילה נקרע הים (מדרש תנחומא (בובר) פרשת בשלח סימן יב) .

Other Works on Milah

An excellent sefer on milah, *Koret ha-Brit*, was written by R. E. Posek and first printed in Lvov in 1893 and recently reprinted (300 pgs). This sefer covers all topics relating to milah and provides incredible sources and many of his own fascinating insights on the topics. It also includes an abridged selection of all the kabbalah aspects mentioned in R. Lidas *Sod ha-Shem*. He received many nice haskomos to the sefer among them the Marsham, Adres and Sdei Chemed. Besides for receiving these *haskomot* he also received many notes on his work from the Adres and Marsham indicating that both read the book closely. The Adres, in his *haskamah*, discusses limiting oneself to a single topic.

ומצאנו לרבותינו ז"ל שהיו מצוינים במקצוע אחת יותר מחבריהם [ע"י ברכות כ"א, מו"ק כח ב, ע"ז ד' א', ב"ק לט נג א, ב"מ ס"ו פ' א', חולין נב ב, גיטין ה' ב] ומה"ט קבעו הלכה כמותם בזה [ע"י רש"י כתובת מג ב, רא"ש ב"ק פרק ד] כן נוכל לומר על ידינו המחבר...

Another important work was the *Zecher Dovid* written by R. Dovid Zechus Modena first printed in 1816 . This work is extremely special. This was very rare ever since it was printed and therefore it was rarely quoted even *Sefer ha-Brit*, discussed below, which quotes many seforim on the topic does not quote this work. The sefer *Otzar ha-Brit* from the famous yerushalmi mohel does quote this work often as he received special permission from Hebrew

University to borrow it when he was working on his seforim. In 2001, Ahavat Sholom reprinted this work in a beautiful set of six volumes including a volume of indexes and a volume of derashos of his on chumrah that was never printed before. This work is an encyclopedia on Milah and many other topics. It is divided into three sections the first two relate to milah in all aspects of kabbalah and halacha. The importance of this work is besides for quoting an excellent selection of sources on his topics he adds in many of his own nice points brings many sources from unprinted manuscripts and organizes it all very well making it a pleasure to read. The third section of this sefer is all about the cycle of the year from Shabbat and all the Yamim Tovim here too he deals a little bit about milah but mostly focuses on the Yamim Tovim and includes excellent discussions and sources on the topics. This is one of the best seforim which Ahavat Sholom has printed.

Another work on the topic is *Machsehrei Milah* written by R. Eliyahu Halevi, Livorno, 1793 and recently reprinted by Ahavat Sholom. This new edition includes a selection of the Kuntres on *metzizah* from R. Hezekiah Medini the author of the *Sedi Hemed* as well as a selection of halachos from R. Yakov Hillel.

Another work is *Sefer ha-Bris* written by famous mohel R. Pirutinsky comprised of 415 pages and is an extremely thorough work on the topic. One section of great interest is on *metzizah* (pp. 216-26) where he brings many sources on the topic including R. Chaim Solovetick's and R. Aron Kotler's opinions (p. 224).

Another sefer of interest is called *Meshiv Nefesh* first printed in 1906 and recently reprinted by Tuvias. The author was Dr. Sherhai a doctor who also appeared to be a big talmid chacham. This work consists of three parts. The first part titled *Meshiv Nefesh* is about Halacha Limoshe Misinai all over chazal He also deals with the Rambam Shitas on this topic at great length. The second part of the sefer deals with many aspects of Milah showing, at great length, that the *metzizah* is an very important part of the Mitzvah and is not just based upon danger to the baby. He has a interesting discussion about the famous concept *nishtanh ha-teveh* (pp. 21b- 22b, 34a-34b). He also claims, like many others, that the Chasam Sofer teshuvah on the topic of *metzizah* is not a forgery but, instead, was a *horas sh'eah* (p.64). The third part of the sefer is titled *Bris Shalom* in which the author argues, using medical sources, that *metzizah* is not dangerous at all. As an aside besides for all his discussions in regard to Milah he also has a few other interesting discussions where he deals with going to doctors (p.12b), the knowledge of Noach, Moshe Rabenu (p.12b) Tanim vamorim in medical areas (p.18a) including a list of those that actually practiced medicine (pp.14b,17a). He also includes a list of Geonim Rishonim and achronim (pp.19a- 22b) who practiced medicine including Rashi (p.19b). He concludes this section with a very interesting piece (p.23a):

מדוע נשתנה הדור הזה מדורות הראשונים שהיו גם כן חכמים גדולים בחכמת הרפואה וגאונים גדולים בחכמת התורה, אף שברוך ה' לא אלמן ישראל כי נמצאים גם בזמננו בפרט בארץ אשכנז... ורופאים הושמרים תורתנו הקדושה כדיו וכדת בכל פרטיה ודקדוקיה מהם וגם כן גדולי תורה על כל זה אינם במדה מרובה כמו בדורות הראשונים... התשובה לשאלה הזאת נמצא גם כן בתורתנו הקדושה על פי מליצת חז"ל באמרם לעולם יכנס אדם בכי טוב ויצא בכי טוב, פירוש כל מה שיתחל האדם ליכנס באיזה דבר או באיזה חכמה ללמוד יכנס בכי טוב ואין טוב אלא תורה פירוש אל יכנס אלא כשישים תורת ה' לעיקר, וכן בדורות הראשונים שבתחלה מלאו כריסם בש"ס פוסקים כמו כל הגאונים שהבאתי ורצו ללמוד החכמה הזאת באשר היא שייכה לחכמת התורה, והרבה ענינים בחז"ל מה שלא יכלו לבארם בביאור נכון רק על ידי חכמת רפואה כמו כל הגאונים שהבאתי ורצו ללמוד החכמה הזאת באשר היא שייכה לחכמת התורה, והרבה ענינים בחז"ל מה שלא יכלו לבארם בביאור נכון רק על ידי חכמת הרפואה... וכוונתם היתה רצויה להיות להם מזה מטרה בה בחיים ושיהא להם לחם חוקם מזה בכדי שיוכלו ללמוד וללמד את שתי חכמות שתהינה מתאימות ועולות בד בבד ותהיינה לאחדים בידם וגם לקיים מצות מעשה היא פיקוח נפשות חיי דברייתא, ומאחר שנכנסו בכי טוב שלמים בחכמת הרפואה ומלאים במדות טובות וביראת שמים וכל שיראתו חטאו קודמת לחכמתו חכמתו מתקיימת, אבל לא כן עתה בדור הזה רובא דרובא נכנסו ללמוד חכמות ולשונות בעודנו כשהוא נער הוא כתינוק שנשבה לבין הנכרים דלא עסקו בלימוד התורה כפי הנצרך...

Over the years many sefarim and articles have been written about metzizah pro and against doing it with a *klei*. One such work was called *Sefer Dam Brit*, printed in 1901 in London by Alexander Tertis. This work contained a method of doing metzizah be-klei called the Tertis-apparatus (see below) and including many important *haskomot* of gedolim.

One *haskamah* was from the *Orach Hashulchan* (p.34) but R. Pirutinsky already points out that in his work *Orach Hashulchan* (Y.D. 264:19) that R. Epstein takes a different view than the one he expresses in his *haskamah*.

דע שיש בזמנינו שאומרים שיותר טוב לעשות המציצה לא בפה אלא באיזה ספוג שמספג את הדם ולא נאבה לאם ולא נשמע להם ורבותינו חכמי הש"ס היו בקיאים ומחוכמים יותר מהם אך זהו בוודאי שהמוצץ יהיה לו פה נקי בלא שום מחלה ושניים נקיים... ואין לנו לחדש חדשות כאלה ונהיה כאבותינו ובמדינתנו לא שמענו זה:

Many of the *haskomot* are worth studying and quoting but one of the important ones was from R. Yakov Yosef where he writes (p. 6):

וכבר למדנו חז"ל ללמוד בדברים הנוגעים לחכמת הרפואה והטבע מחכמי הרופאים... ולמה לא נסמוך על הרופאים שאומרים כי מציצה של שמירת הבריאות תוכל להיות על ידי כלי מתוקן על זה וגם לא מצינו במסכת שבת באיזה אופן לעשות...

This *haskamah* in particular incurred the wrath of the Adres in a rather harsh letter recently printed in his *Shut Mayneh Eliyhu* (p. 352). Shockingly this letter was not edited out. The letter is really worth quoting in its entirety as it is very important for the whole topic but here is part:

לבי ידאב על מעשה הקובץ של לעטרס שהדפיס בעתונו היהודי המקבץ שו"ת ממי שהוא מונה וספור שלשים וא גם יותר רבנים המתירים, ובראשם ימנה הגאון חת"ס והגאון חריף שקוראים אותו בארץ ליטא חריף. צחוק מכאבי לב עשה לנו בהזוג הזה, ומאן מעייל בר נפח בארעא דעיילי זקוקין דנורא, מה ענין ר' יעקב מנויארק אשר היה רב בזאגור ומ"מ בוילנא, ועל ידי מכונות ותחבולות כדרכו יצא לנויארק, וידענו היטב את האיש ואת שיחו תהלוכותיו ותחבולותיו מתחילה עד סוף, מה ענינו לרבינו החתם סופר, אשר עוד כשמונים שנה בדור דעה שהיו אז כל הגאונים האידרים בחיים ה' הוא הראש וראשון להוראה וממנו יצאה תורה לכל ישראל, ואותו הרב ר' יעקב שלא שמש תלמידי חכמים ומלך מעצמו, על פי תבונתו, כי פקח גדול הוא, אינו מגיע לקרסולי תלמידי תלמידו של הגאון חתם סופר, לא בתורה ולא במעשים טובים, והרי לפנינו שעזב עיר ווילנא תפארת ליטא, והלך לנוע על ארצות אמעריקא להיות שם רב ראשון בנויארק כחלומו אשר חלום... והרואה דברי הר"מ פ"ו ה"א מדיעות, יעיל שם היטב בלשונו, יראה עד כמה מלאה לבו יראת שמים לעשות כן. ואיש כזה אשר בהיותו מולדותו לא ה' מגדולי הרבנים רק מגדולי הדרשנים כיד הדיבור הטובה עליו, אשר בעבור זה נתקבל למ"מ בוילנא (אחרי תחבולות רבות מצידי), הוא נעשה חריף בעברו על הים ובא לארץ החדשה, כשושנה בין החוחים, ונעשה שר לסרוחים. והנה הוא גם בעל הוראה ויתיר כמו שלבו טוב עליו, ובדור החושך הזה מקלו יגיד לו, כל המיקל הרי זה משובח, וכל המחמיר הוא ללעג ולמטרה לפני בני עולה, כמעשה אתרוגי קורפו, שביעית, ועוד ועוד אשר הדבר נמסר לעורכי העתונים לעפר בעפר על כל מי שלא יאמר כדבריהם.

Interestingly enough elsewhere the Adres writes much less harsh about the topic in his notes to R. Posek *Kores Habris* the Adres writes (pp.143a-143b)

בזמנינו המציאו חכמי הרופאים פני המציצה כמין שפופרת חלקה למצוץ על ידה בפה ולא להכניס האבר בפה ולמוץ וכל זה מחשש חולי המתדבק להמוצץ או מהמוצץ להתינוק והתירו פרושים את הדבר ובכיוצא בזה י"ל שמאל
דוחה וימין מקרבת

As an aside we see from this letter the tremendous respect and kovod he had for the Chasam Sofer. Other places in his writings show this for example is in *Shivis Zion* (p.233) after quoting the famous Chasam Sofer in succah ... (36b) that some edited out that says:

... לע"ד רבי ישמעאל נמי לא אמר מקרא ואספת דגנך אלא בא"י ורוב ישראל שרויין שהעבודה בקרקע גופה מצוה משום יישוב א"י ולהוציא פירותי הקדושי ועל זה ציותה התורה ואספת דגנך ובעוז זורה גורן השעורי' הלילה משום מצוה וכאלו תאמר לא אניה תפילין מפני שאני עוסק בתורה ה"נ לא יאמר לא אאסוף דגני מפני עסק התורה

ואפשר אפילו שארי אומניו' שיש בהם ישוב העולם הכל בכלל מצוה אבל כשאנו מפוזרי' בעו"ה בין או"ה וכל שמרבה העולם יישוב מוסיף עבודת ה' חורבן מודה ר"י לרשב"י וע"ז אנו סומכי' על ר' נהוראי במתני' סוף קידושין מניח אני כל אומניות שבעולם ואיני מלמד בני אלא תורה היינו בח"ל ... The Adres adds ...: הרי לנו דבר נפלא מגאון עולם אביר הרועים רבינו שבגולה אשר הוא עומד ההוראה שכל בית ישראל נשען עליו ומי יבא אחריו ...

[See also the list in *Seder Eliyhu* pp.122-123] For more on this see here .

As an aside it seems that R. Yakov Yosef never knew about the Adres opinion of him as in a Haskamah to the sefer *Neveh Sholom* written five years later in 1900 he writes :

ומחמת כי חולה אנכי ל"ע ע"כ לא יכילתי לעיין בו כראוי אבל המיעוט אשר ראיתי יעיד על ספרו כולו כי ראוי להוציא לאור עולם ובפרט כי כבר הוסכם ספר של מחבר הנ"ל מידדי הרב הגאון כו"ה אליהו דוד ראבניבוץ אב"ד פאנויעז ואין בודקין מן המזבח ולמעלה

[Thanks to Eli Markin for this source.]

Another excellent collection on Milah is called sefer *Otzar Habris* (four volumes) written by the famous Yerusalmi Mohel R. Yosele Weissberg. As an note of interest in his section on the metzizah controversy in volume four on page seven in the beginning of this section he gives credit to Jacob Katz for Katz's essay on the topic

Notes

[1] See J. Katz, *Divine Law in Human Hands*, Magnes Press (Jerusalem: 1998), pp. 320-56.

[2] J. Katz, *Divine Law in Human Hands*, Magnes Press (Jerusalem: 1998), pp. 357-402.

[3] See, e.g., Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, University of California Press, (Berkeley & Los Angeles, Ca.: 2005).

[4] For more on this responsum, see *Kuntress ha-Teshuvot*, vol II, no. 2031.