‘YOUR COVENANT THAT YOU HAVE SEALED IN OUR FLESH’: WOMEN, COVENANT, AND CIRCUMCISION*

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There are only two passages in the rabbinic prayer book whose language prevents, or has been thought to prevent, their recitation by women. The first is the benediction ‘who has not made me a woman,’ which has been discussed often by historians, jurists, and apologists.¹ As is well known, this daily benediction is not recited by women. The second is the benediction in the birkat ha-mazon (Grace after Meals) which thanks God for ‘your covenant that you have sealed in our flesh,’ that is, circumcision. As we shall see, in medieval Europe some women omitted this phrase in their recitation of the birkat ha-mazon because the covenant of circumcision does not apply to women. This brief essay is devoted to the history of this phrase.

PELIMO AND RAV

The core of the rabbinic birkat ha-mazon consists of three paragraphs, each of them phrased as a blessing. The first thanks God for the gift of sustenance; the second thanks God for the gift of the land of Israel; the third is a prayer for the restoration of Jerusalem. The Talmud discusses the precise wording of the second benediction:²

R. Eliezer says: whoever does not (thank God for) ‘a desirable, good, and spacious land’ in the blessing concerning the land, and (whoever does not pray for the restoration of) ‘the kingdom of the house of David’ in the blessing concerning the building of Jerusalem, has not fulfilled his obligation (of reciting the birkat ha-mazon).

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* This essay is an expanded version of a portion of chapter five of my Why aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?, (2005), a study of circumcision and gender in Judaism. I am delighted to dedicate this essay to my teacher Prof. Louis Feldman, a model Jew, teacher and scholar.


² B. Berakhot 48b.
Nahum the Elder says: one must (also) include in it ‘covenant.’
R. Yosi says: one must (also) include in it ‘Torah.’
Pelimo says: ‘covenant’ must precede ‘Torah,’ because the latter
(‘Torah’) was given in three covenants but the former (‘covenant’) was
given in thirteen covenants.

The blessing for the land must contain appropriate praises of the
land; we thank God for a ‘desirable, good, and spacious land.’ We
must also thank God for covenant and Torah, because the gift of
the land is intimately linked with these other gifts. Pelimo, an obscure
figure whose name is transmitted in various forms and who is known
only from several citations in the Bavli, says that the mention of
‘covenant’ must precede the mention of ‘Torah,’ because the Torah
was given in three covenants, but the covenant, that is, the covenant
of circumcision, was given in thirteen covenants. Numerous rabbinic
texts state or assume that the Torah was given to Israel in three
covenantal ceremonies; the precise identification of the three was the
subject of abundant discussion by the medieval commentators.
Numerous other passages state or assume that the covenant of cir-
cumcision has the force of thirteen covenants, since the word berit
appears thirteen times in Genesis 17, the chapter in which God
enjoins the observance of circumcision upon Abraham. Pelimo has
juxtaposed these discrete bits of information and drawn a novel con-
clusion: since thirteen is greater than three, the covenant of cir-
cumcision should precede Torah in the second paragraph of the
birkat ha-mazon.

For our purposes, the intellectual cogency of Pelimo’s exegesis is
not important. What is important is Pelimo’s assumption that ‘covenant’
in the birkat ha-mazon means ‘the covenant of circumcision,’ an inter-
pretation that is by no means obvious or inevitable. The same assump-
tion appears on the next page of the Talmud in an interesting story.

R. Zeira said to R. Hisda: let the master come and teach us (how to
recite the birkat ha-mazon).

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3 The vocalization ‘Pelimo’ is just a guess.
4 For example, see Rashi here and R. Hai Gaon in Lewin, Otzar Hagonim: Berakhot
p. 83 no. 234. For full discussion see Lieberman, Tosefta KFshutah Sotah 707–710.
5 M. Nedarim 3:11; Y. Nedarim 3.14 38b; B. Shabbat 132a and 133a; B. Pesahim
69b; B. Yevamot 5b.
6 B. Berakhot 49a.