

# **Reflection on Circumcision**

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## **Preface**

*The practice of circumcision has come under attack in recent days with unprecedented vigor. Growing numbers of Jewish parents are – to our sadness – making the choice not to circumcise their sons. Recently in Germany a court decision declared the procedure illegal on “humanitarian” grounds despite the considerable medical evidence that the procedure is beneficial. We know that there will be other legal challenges.*

*In response to these developments, the World Union for Progressive Judaism has prepared the following position paper on circumcision. It is intended for those looking for guidance from a Progressive Jewish understanding of Jewish tradition – and why we, as Progressive Jews strongly recommend continuing this ancient practice. While we do not expect to convince those for whom our religious tradition has become irrelevant, we do hope it will be helpful to those eager to understand the place of Brit Milah (ritual circumcision) in Jewish thought and practice.*

*In preparing this paper I have received invaluable feedback from members of the Progressive Rabbinical community. My colleagues at WUPJ, Rabbis Gary Bretton-Granatoor and Joel Oseran have endorsed and encouraged this project. They have both offered very helpful suggestions*

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*Rabbi Stephen Fuchs, Erev Rosh Hashanah 5773*

## Introduction

On the ladder of Jewish *mitzvot*, circumcision ranks at or near the very top. Therefore two recent phenomena raise concern: The first is the campaign in some civil circles to view circumcision as a barbaric invasion on the body of an innocent child. There have even been some attempts to have the procedure of infant circumcision legally banned. The second is the decision of some Liberal, Reform and Progressive Jews to forgo the rite for their sons because they have been influenced by the movement referred to above, or for other reasons of personal choice. While personal choice is a hallmark of our Progressive movement, we believe that meaningful choice is always a choice informed by knowledge and understanding of our tradition's teachings. To that end, we hope this paper will be helpful.

## The Place of Circumcision in Jewish Tradition

Our connection to the rite of circumcision goes back to the very beginning of the story of our people. In Genesis 17, God commands Abraham to circumcise all male children at the age of 8 days. The language could not be stronger or less equivocal: "My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant (Genesis 17: especially verses 13-14)."

In a famous discussion in the *Mechilta*, (an halachic Midrash on the Book of Exodus, 3<sup>rd</sup> Cent. CE) Rabbi Akiva expresses the opinion that the very word ברית – Covenant – the basic understanding between God and our people upon which all Jewish religious practices are based – refers to circumcision and abstention from idol worship. (*Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael*, ba-hodesh, ch.2 Horovitz-Rabin, p.208). In *Bereshit Rabba* (Midrash on Genesis) (49:2), we read that Israel's acceptance of circumcision led to our status as "the chosen people."

*Mishnah Nedarim* (2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> Cent CE) 3:11 contains strong rabbinic defenses of circumcision. The rabbis use the phrase גדולה מילה "Great is circumcision" to stress its central importance in Jewish life. Rabbi Ishmael points out that the covenant of circumcision was established thirteen times because the word ברית (covenant) appears in Genesis, chapter 17, 13 times. Rabbi Jose attributes the pre-eminence of circumcision to the fact that it is permissible to perform the rite on the eighth day even if the eighth day of the child's life falls on Shabbat. By contrast other events that mark a change of status like weddings and funerals are forbidden on Shabbat.

Indeed the only thing according to Jewish law that should prevent circumcision on a boy's eighth day of life is any concern – any concern whatsoever – that the procedure might be injurious to the baby's health. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cent. CE, Laws of Circumcision, 1:18)

Rabbi Joshua ben Karcha claims גדולה מילה because "it was not suspended for Moses the righteous for even one hour." The reference here is to the mysterious three

verses which suddenly appear – seemingly without direct relation to what comes before or after – in Exodus 4:24-26.

After God finally convinces Moses to accept the task of leading the Children of Israel from Egypt, we read: "At a night encampment along the way, the Eternal encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his legs with it saying, 'You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me.'"

One might fairly wonder, what do these verses mean, and why do they appear here, seemingly out of context? The rabbinic answer to this question is that God sought to kill Moses because he had neglected the cardinal commandment of circumcising his son. Only Zipporah's quick action saved him. If God would have killed our greatest figure Moses for not circumcising his son, how much the more so are ordinary people required to circumcise their sons.

The Mishnah provides further support for the central position of circumcision in God's Covenant with Israel in the statement by the Mishnah's redactor, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi who said: "גדולה מילה" for in spite of all his virtues of Abraham our patriarch, he was not called 'worthy' (my translation of Hebrew תמים, often translated "perfect" and used to refer to animals suitable for sacrifice, or "blameless") until he was circumcised. The reference is to the covenantal imperative in Genesis 17:1: "Walk before me and be תמים" just before the Almighty commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and his household.

In chapter 29 of the *Midrash Pirke de Rabbi Eleazar* (2<sup>nd</sup> Cent. with material as late as 8<sup>th</sup> Cent.) we read that Abraham circumcised himself on Yom Kippur. Therefore on every Yom Kippur, God remembers Abraham's circumcision and forgives the sins of Israel. (My father, Leo Fuchs, of blessed memory recalled a circumcision taking place in his boyhood synagogue in Leipzig, Germany on Yom Kippur.)

The Mishnah (Nedarim 3:11) concludes with the contention that were it not for circumcision, God would not have created the universe. This interpretation bases itself on Jeremiah 33:25: "If my covenant be not day and night, I had not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth." The covenant here is interpreted as circumcision, and according to this statement, the creation of the world depended upon it.

A subsequent Talmudic passage sums up the Mishnah's equation of circumcision with our eternal covenant by asserting: "גדולה מילה" because its importance is equal to that of all the other commandments in the Torah." (B. Nedarim 32A)

This assertion is based on the Gematria (according numerical values to letters in a word) of ברית which totals 612. Our tradition teaches that there are 613 commandments for the good Jew to observe. The idea is that the act of circumcision is weighted equal to all the other 612. To be fair, though, other mitzvot (e.g. giving Tzedakah, honesty in business, and the study of Torah are also equated to all the other commandments in other places.) Still the importance of circumcision in rabbinic thought is beyond challenge. Indeed considering circumcision on the level of

Tzedakah, honesty in business and the study of Torah is a strong argument for its primacy.

The logical question for us to ask is, "Why?" Why did the Sages who shaped normative Jewish practice equate circumcision, which, is described in the Torah as a *symbol* of the covenant with the covenant itself? In a study undertaken in 1969, Rabbi Sidney B. Hoeing, the late, eminent scholar of Yeshiva University provides a plausible answer. He wrote: "The designation of circumcision as covenant is due to rabbinic reaction to Christian attacks on circumcision." *Mishnah Nedarim* 3:11 (to which we have referred) responded to Christian challenges, "in a most direct manner, even utilizing the exact terminology and similar expressions of the anti-circumcision concept in their response and rebuttal. ("Circumcision: The Covenant of Abraham," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, April 1969, pp.322-323)

The Mishnaic formula גדולה מילה is a direct response to Paul's statement in I Corinthians 7:19: "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing." The Christian claim that the rabbis took such pains to rebut was that the new covenant made through Jesus nullified the old covenant which God made with Abraham through circumcision. By stressing the importance of circumcision – even interpreting that God would have killed Moses himself for neglecting it – the rabbis are appealing to Jews to remain within the fold and not believe that New Testament accounts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven in any way supersede the commandments that underpin our Jewish covenant with God.

### **Circumcision Is Medically Beneficial**

Circumcision alone has been found to reduce the rate of HIV infection by an astounding 50-60%. Extensive studies have been conducted in Africa where the HIV infection and AIDS rates are at epidemic proportion. The results are profound, so dramatic that some of the studies were stopped midway because it was deemed unethical to NOT circumcise the control group. Circumcision alone – with no other change in a person's life or behavior – reduces the rates of HIV infection by 50-60%. Accordingly, the World Health Organization has endorsed male circumcision.

A meta-analysis of 27 research papers (scientists reviewing the research studies of other scientists) concludes: "Male circumcision is associated with a significantly reduced risk of HIV infection among men in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly those at high risk of HIV. These results suggest that consideration should be given to the acceptability and feasibility of providing safe services for male circumcision as an additional HIV prevention strategy in areas of Africa where men are not traditionally circumcised."  
([http://journals.lww.com/aidsonline/Abstract/2000/10200/Male\\_circumcision\\_and\\_risk\\_of\\_HIV\\_infection\\_in.18.aspx](http://journals.lww.com/aidsonline/Abstract/2000/10200/Male_circumcision_and_risk_of_HIV_infection_in.18.aspx) )

Another research study designed to look beyond HIV infection and assess, "the efficacy of male circumcision for the prevention of herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2) and human papillomavirus (HPV) infections and syphilis in HIV-negative adolescent boys and men," concludes: "In addition to decreasing the incidence of HIV infection, male circumcision significantly reduced the incidence of HSV-2 infection

and the prevalence of HPV infection, findings that underscore the potential public health benefits of the procedure.”  
<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa0802556>)

A 2011 study confirmed what has been widely taught for years: There is a significantly less risk of cervical cancer among women whose sexual partners are circumcised. (Salynn Boyles. Reviewed by Laura J. Martin, MD, “Male Circumcision Cuts Women’s Cervical Cancer Risk”, <http://www.MDHelathnews>, January 6, 2011)

On August 27, 2012 the American Academy of Pediatrics published a study that concludes: “Evaluation of current evidence indicates that the health benefits of newborn male circumcision outweigh the risks and that the procedure’s benefits justify access to this procedure for families who choose it. Specific benefits identified included prevention of urinary tract infections, including HIV. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has endorsed this statement. (Circumcision Policy Statement, Task Force on Circumcision, *Pediatrics*, Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics,  
<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2012/08/22/peds.2012-1989>)

The primary purpose of this paper is to endorse circumcision as a sign of identity with the ancient Covenant of our people, but there is more than ample evidence to conclude that circumcision is a desirable health procedure.

### **Current Attacks on Circumcision**

Today, circumcision has come under attack – sometimes viciously – from several quarters. Let me state at the outset that while (to paraphrase the late Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart) it is hard for me to fully define anti-Semitism, I recognize it – after a long career as a rabbi – when I see it. There is no question in my mind that anti-Semitism is a major force behind the drive to demonize or ban circumcision.

Whenever I read – as I do with increasing frequency these days – yet another attack on circumcision, a famous response on the subject written in 1950 by the eminent and well-loved English pediatrician Sir James Spence jumps to mind. Spence – as a leading expert – was asked by another pediatrician whether he would advise the parents of a baby boy to circumcise him. I see Dr. Spence's answer dripping with anti-Semitism.

"You ask me, with a note of persuasion in your question if (the child should be circumcised)? Am I to make this decision on scientific grounds, or am I to acquiesce in a ritual that took its origin at the behest of that arch-sanitarian Moses? (Sir James Spence, "On Circumcision", *Lancet*, 1964, 2:902)

Over the years I have found Dr. Spence's response a congruent grid to place over the ideas expressed by most of those who oppose circumcision. In 2011, in San Francisco, a serious attempt to legally ban circumcision garnered surprising support. It takes only 7,168 signatures in that city of 750,000 residents to place a referendum on the ballot. Those signatures were on a petition calling for a law that would have

made circumcising a male under the age of 18 punishable by a fine of \$1000 or a year in jail.

In 2011, the comic book character Foreskin Man appeared. “Created by Matthew Hess, the first and second volumes show graphic images of monster doctors and evil Mohels fighting for ‘the penile flesh of an 8-day-old infant boy.’ The hero, who some feel is of the Aryan variety, swoops in at the last second to save the infant’s foreskin.” (<http://www.ImprfectParent.com>, Nicholas Whitaker, “Foreskin Man: Anti-circ or Anti-Semitic”, *Imperfect Parent*, June 7, 2011).

The stereotypical hook nosed, grimy appearance of Foreskin Man and the clean, blond powerful and definitely Aryan look of the “hero” leave no doubt at all about the anti-Semitic nature of this comic.

Attempts to ban circumcision, of course are not new. The first and best known initiative was one of the causes of the Maccabean revolt (165 BCE) when the Assyrian Greek King Antiochus the IV imposed such a ban on the Jews of Judaea.

Those who inveigh against circumcision ignore or purposely overlook the many studies that show lower rates of HIV in circumcised males, lower rates of urinary tract infection and lower rates of cervical cancer in women whose sexual partners have been circumcised. Yes, I am indeed convinced that the ugly head of anti-Semitism lurks behind many of those who attack circumcision so vehemently.

Of course not all opposition to circumcision is rooted in anti-Semitism. Sympathy for a child undergoing a surgical procedure that does involve slight risk, and the visceral reaction (that any parent or rabbi who has officiated knows) of parents being conflicted at a procedure that brings pain – however momentary – to their child is understandable. Doubtless, as well there are some medical professionals who with pure motives feel the procedure is not in the child’s best interest. On balance, though, it is our hope that those concerns do not outweigh the many positive arguments for circumcision and the joy of entering another child into our Ancient Covenant with the Almighty.

### **A Spiritual Understanding of Circumcision for Modern Jews**

We might well ask, aside from its primacy in the hierarchy of *mitzvot*, and aside from the preponderance of medical opinion attributing significant health benefits to the practice, is there a religious or spiritual basis for the practice today? I believe that there is.

In 1979 I heard a presentation by the renowned American professor, Rabbi Arthur Green, in which he made some eye-opening observations that I have shared – with very positive reception – at dozens of Brit Milah ceremonies that I have conducted over the years because they resonate with the very essence of Progressive Jewish ideals:

We human beings, the Torah teaches, are created in the image of God. That does not mean, of course that we look like God, because God has no shape or form. It

means that we of all creatures are the most God-like in our ability to have an impact on the world around us.

We are neither as strong as an elephant nor as fast as the cheetah. But no elephant or cheetah will ever split the atom. We are the only creature who can go to the side of a mountain; mine ore from the mountain turn the ore into iron and the iron into steel with which to form the most delicate of instruments for operations to repair a damaged heart. At the same time we are also the only creatures on earth that can go to the same mountain, mine the same ore, turn it into iron and steel to make bombs and bullets whose only purpose is to kill or to maim. We have enormous power, and our covenant exists to urge us to use that power for good and not for evil.

The Midrash (*Bereshit Rabba*, 8:11) puts it this way: We human beings are the only creatures with characteristics both of God (or the celestial beings) and the lower animals. Like the animals we eat, sleep, drink, propagate our species, eliminate our waste, and die. Like the celestials, though, we have an intellect, a capacity to communicate and a spiritual potential which none of the other animals possess. Our Jewish teachings urge us to overcome our animal instincts and enhance the Divine Image in which God created us.

When, we might ask, are we – and men in particular though certainly not exclusively – most likely to succumb to our purely animal instincts? The answer is when we are sexually aroused. What better place then to have a sign that we are in Covenant with the Almighty than at the tip of the male sexual organ?

There are, of course, many reasons why humans engage in sexual contact ranging from gratifying a physical desire to the hope that they might become partners with the Almighty in creating a new life. At its best, sex between humans – unlike the other animals – is an act of physical and emotional love and unity. Again, what better place for a sign of our covenant with God than the one body part shared by men and women during the act of coitus? What better reminder could we have when we engage in sex that we are not merely animals but the creatures God made in the Divine image?

Because sexual intercourse – whether by design or not – might lead to the creation of a new life, what better place to have a sign of the Covenant than the spot from which the life force flows from the male and is received by the female?

## **Conclusion**

Circumcision rose to the top of the list of important *mitzvot* because of its origin in the story of Abraham, at the very beginning of our emergence as a people. Its importance grew, and circumcision was a *sine qua non* for Jews in the rabbinic period in response to the challenge to Jewish life presented by early Christianity. It has maintained its position since then despite bans from time to time in various countries. In the State of Israel where the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population consider themselves "secular" or "non-religious", eighth day circumcision for Jewish boys is universal.

In addition there are significant health benefits for the practice, and the scent of anti-Semitism wafts from the attempts in various places to outlaw the practice or label it barbaric.

To detach ourselves, therefore, from 4000 years of Jewish history and to abandon a practice considered so vital to Jewish identity throughout that history would be a grave error. It would give further ammunition to those more traditional Jews who wish to label us an aberrant sect who have renounced in the most fundamental way the Covenant of Abraham. When we add to these facts the uplifting ethical and spiritual dimension which we can – if we choose – attach to the Covenant of circumcision, there is every reason for Progressive Jews to continue the practice.