

A special case?

Some of those who condemn infant circumcision in general make a special exemption for Milah, because of its relatively long history and its immense significance within the religion and community. Yet a small but growing number of Jews are opposed to it. Genital modification of boys is a human rights issue (as it clearly is for girls). To oppose circumcision only for non-Jews would be to say that "**Jewish babies have fewer human rights than other babies**" so it would clearly be anti-Semitic to make an exception.

Other claims:

- "We do it to welcome him into the community." A strange welcome, to cut off part of his genitals.
- "A little brandy in his mouth and he doesn't feel it." At least some mohelim "prepare" the baby in private, slitting the foreskin and/or tearing it from the glans. This puts the baby into shock: he only *seems* to be relaxed.
- "It's very quick." To a week-old baby, it must seem an eternity.
- "We do it with love, that makes it quite different." The baby has no way of knowing the state of mind of the people who are doing it. All he can feel is the knife.

The Circumcision Resource Center has more about opposition to circumcision within Judaism. It has devised alternative Britot, without Milah, Britot Shalom / Shalem / Chayim (Covenants of Peace / Wholeness / Life).

As well as the physical advantages to the boy, Britot Shalom are equally suitable for welcoming girl babies and can be performed without causing heartache to parents, especially mothers.

Or, to put it another way:

It's a mitzvah to leave a baby intact!

Resources

A list of providers of Brit Shalom (Brit B'li Milah) is at <http://shalom.notlong.com>

www.circumcision.org is the website of the Circumcision Resource Center, a Jewish site.

In Israel a community exists of families with intact sons, Kahal, www.kahal.org, email info@kahal.org

Three good books from a Jewish perspective are *Marked in Your Flesh* by Leonard Glick, *Covenant of Blood* by Lawrence Hoffman and *Questioning Circumcision* by Ronald Goldman.

Circumcision Exposed by Billy Ray Boyd, though he is not Jewish, has an extensive and sensitive commentary on Brit Milah.

Downloaded from The Intactivism Pages, www.circumstitions.com
(from www.circumstitions.com/Docs/britwm.pdf)



"A voice from heaven should be ignored if it is not on the side of justice."

- Isaac Bashevis Singer

MODERN JEWS, striving to live their lives on the fulcrum of abiding ethics and accruing knowledge, are continually challenged to examine their faith. Informing the heart of the world's human rights struggles are Talmudic precepts: the simple eloquence of *Tsar ba'alei chaim*, the moral prohibition against causing pain to living things, the command to redeem the world.

In any other arena of medical or religious practice, the wilful removal of healthy, G-d-given, purposefully functioning tissue (without sufficient mitigation of the pain that it causes) from a fully conscious infant, would be immediately recognized, in both Jewish and American law, as the trespass it is.

Identity

It is generally agreed that being circumcised is not a condition of being Jewish. Girls obviously do not need to be circumcised. A boy is Jewish if his mother is Jewish, from the moment he is born. In fact, a boy may be excused circumcision permanently if his health would be endangered by it, for example if he has haemophilia. Jewish boys in countries where routine circumcision is not common, such as Holland, may be left intact and yet remain Jews in good standing. In Sweden, only 40% of Jewish boys are circumcised. Many Soviet Jews, left intact for fear of communist persecution, have chosen to remain so; and (contrary to some opinions) an intact boy may have a Bar Mitzvah. As one rabbi simply put it, "We don't check."

The claim that circumcision is essential for the survival of the Jewish people therefore can not stand, dramatic though it may be.

Habit

Many people invoke the power of "tradition". Yet some traditions, such as slavery, segregation and female circumcision, are unquestionably bad traditions; traditions can change, and bad ones should.

To break such an old habit may seem like "wasting" all the circumcisions of the past, but that is not so: what value they had was to the people of their day. It is not inherited or bequeathed. It may seem at first to insult one's ancestors to do other than what they did, but it is equally an insult to our own intelligence, and to the intelligence of our descendants, to cling blindly to customs of the past.

No-one knows how great the opposition to circumcision within Jewry really is, but it is certainly much greater than is made public, because its opponents stay silent and so fail to communicate with each other.

History

The fact that Jews have resisted **enforced** attempts to stamp out circumcision can always be a source of pride. Some think that the traditions of Chanukah, remembering resistance to the persecution by Antiochus IV, mean Jews must maintain circumcision in memory of that resistance. But people everywhere honour and remember their war dead by dedicating themselves to peace, not war. Voluntarily renouncing something is itself an act of courage and strength, quite distinct from renouncing it by way of submitting to oppression. It is cruelly paradoxical to honour those who resisted **enforced** non-circumcision by **enforcing** circumcision on baby boys.

Different from others?

About 500 million male Muslims, more than 100 million gentile USAmerican boys and men, and some scores of millions of others including many tribal people are circumcised, but only about 7 million Jews, so circumcision does not set Jews apart.

Literalism

Many believe the Creator of the Universe literally commanded that Abram circumcise himself, his family and their heirs forever. Echoes of this story may resonate in the minds of those who do not take such a literal view. Yet -

- ✧ The command to circumcise clearly runs parallel to the command to sacrifice Isaac – just a test of his faith: the willingness was all.
- ✧ We may still respect and revere the ideal that Abraham represents, without blindly imitating particulars attributed, perhaps mistakenly, to him.
- ✧ Can we still today in good conscience mark a covenant on the body of a third party who has no choice in the matter?

Modern perceptions of human rights, within the framework of Jewish thought, supercede any demand to override the bodily autonomy of another person.

According to modern scholars, circumcision is not even mentioned in either the earliest, "J", version of Bereshith ("Genesis") nor the next three rewrites by other authors. Yet the story of Abram is there in its entirety, **except** the part about the Covenant being "sealed" with circumcision. Many biblical scholars agree on this point, and it is in accord with the mitzvot against desecrating the body by "making any marks on our bodies," or "cuttings in our flesh".

It has even been suggested that early Judaism **forbad** circumcision!

Loving kindness

Two of the great strengths of Judaism are its rationality and its commitment to learning and scholarship. Another is the tradition of *gemilut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, and the prohibition on deliberately causing pain. Cutting part of a baby's genitals off flies in the face these. Brit Milah is just as painful as surgical circumcision, which is used as a benchmark of pain.

The argument that Jewish babies have a "right" to have part of their penises cut off before they are old enough to give or withhold consent, is self-deceptive.

Halacha provides the ceremony of *hatifat dam berit* (shedding of a token drop of blood) for babies who can not be circumcised at all. This is deemed to be fully efficacious in marking the Covenant.