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## Mourning a Foreskin

by Patricia Karlin-Neumann

March 1, 2011

### THE MEASURE OF HIS GRIEF

by Lisa Braver Moss, CreateSpace, 2010



“Just as he has entered into the covenant of Abraham, so may he be entered into the life of Torah, the blessing of family life, and the practice of goodness.”

I don't believe that these words, spoken at a *brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision), are found in Lisa Braver Moss's provocative novel, *The Measure of his Grief*, but they nonetheless provide a paradoxical frame through which to view the search for wholeness of its protagonist, Dr. Sandy Waldman.

Sandy experiences an inexplicable pain in his penis during the shiva period of mourning for his father Abraham; for him, the brit (covenant) is lost in the milah (circumcision). Brit celebrates a relationship with the Divine and with community. Sandy's physical pain leads him to attempt to undo his own milah. Mourning his circumcision, he strains the covenants he has made in his life; cuts himself off from his medical colleagues, his wife, and his friends; disputes medical and religious justifications for circumcision; and becomes an obsessed and slightly unhinged crusader.

Moss, long an activist herself in the controversy over circumcision for Jewish ritual purposes, gives Sandy many opportunities to articulate the anti-circumcision position. The novel's protagonist argues with rabbis and *mohelim* (those who perform the ritual circumcision), with feminists and physicians. To Moss's credit, her novel evokes thoughtful and even civil discussion with a range of perspectives, creating a living-room conversation with an Orthodox mohel, a feminist female rabbi with a hyphenated name who nonetheless upholds the tradition of ritual circumcision, a liberal cantor, a “conscientious objector” (a Jewish woman seeking a brit without the milah: a covenant ceremony for boys like those newly created for girls), and a Jewish man who is an “intactivist” (a proponent of leaving baby boys intact) who leads a foreskin restoration group. By making space for all of these characters to explain their understanding of the issues and the stakes, Moss makes both doubt and affirmation of circumcision comprehensible positions in a Jewish context.

The civility of this discussion is not often replicated in a real Jewish living room, in synagogue, or in a rabbi's study. Like many of my colleagues, I have seen marriages between two Jews irrevocably ripped asunder by differing perspectives on brit milah. I have tried to mediate while a Jew and a non-Jew argued passionately about circumcision, even when they had made a decision to raise their son as a Jew. When I was pregnant and attending a class for prospective parents, the nurse leading it provided literature on circumcision; “But if you're planning to circumcise your son for ritual purposes, don't bother to take it,” she said. When it comes to ritual and tradition, these are rarely logical and cerebral discussions.

Sandy thinks he will resolve his mourning and his profound sense of nakedness by following the guidance of those engaged in foreskin restoration. With tape and weights, he hopes to undo his milah. In one comic moment, at a book signing for his wife's new cookbook, the stainless steel device he has fastened on to grow his foreskin dislodges and, clattering, drops and rolls, landing at the feet of his wife, giving new meaning to the firefighter's advice to “stop, drop and roll.” In the midrash, Rav Amram, tempted by an illicit sexual relationship, literally yells “fire,” thereby calling in his fellow rabbis to prevent him from ruining his life (*Kiddushin* 81a). Dr. Sandy Waldman is incapable of seeing his self-destructiveness, let alone yelling to save himself.

Impatient with his self-indulgence, Sandy's wife leaves him; his daughter is estranged. His colleagues are wary of his obsession, as he scores physicians on their views of circumcision. He abandons the blessing of family life and seems indifferent to the practice of goodness. Yet, there is one part of the blessing from the brit milah — “so may he be entered into the life of Torah, the blessing of family life, and the practice of goodness” — that takes root. By being drawn into a controversial question of Jewish ritual practice, Sandy makes his way into Torah study to understand, to question, and to stake his claim. The book ends with his adult bar mitzvah, at which he pointedly reads the Torah portion of *Korach*, the fiercest rebel in Jewish sources.

Through her fiction, Lisa Braver Moss has found a new way to insinuate the circumcision controversy into the Jewish conversation. In this, she has done a service for the Jewish community. May that conversation result in increased Torah study, richer blessings of family life, and a sustained practice of goodness.

*Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann, ordained at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1982, is the senior associate dean for religious life at Stanford University. She is the first university chaplain from a tradition other than Protestant Christianity in Stanford's history.*

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#### 5 RESPONSES TO *MOURNING A FORESKIN*

### A Jewish Male Opposing Circumcision July 18, 2011 at 7:19 am

Very interesting to see this discussion take the form of a novel.

Here are two real life accounts of men who describe their feelings about circumcision.

To the Mohel Who Cut Me by Shea Levy

<http://www.beyondthebris.com/2011/06/to-mohel-who-cut-me.html>

On Circumcision, Authority and the Perpetuation of Abuse by Jonathan Friedman

<http://www.beyondthebris.com/2011/06/on-circumcision-authority-and.html>

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### A Jewish Male Opposing Circumcision July 20, 2011 at 10:45 am

Many Jews are speaking out in favor of the San Francisco circumcision referendum ban.

The Jewish Journal itself published a piece about a UK Jewish leader who co-authored an op-ed in the Guardian paper praising such a ban.

Circumcision critic has Board links

[http://www.jewishjournal.com/politics/article/circumcision\\_critic\\_has\\_board\\_links\\_20110616/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/politics/article/circumcision_critic_has_board_links_20110616/)

Time to Ban Male Circumcision? (Op-Ed, Guardian Law, 14 June 2011)

Neil Howard and Rebecca Steinfeld

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2011/jun/14/circumcision-ban-row-san-francisco??>

Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon, one of the most vocal Jewish intactivists wrote an op-ed in the Forward endorsing MGM laws.

Outlawing Circumcision: Good for the Jews? by Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon, The Forward, 5/20/11

<http://www.forward.com/articles/137577/>

Even a Jewish professor of management from Canada, hardly an intactivist, supports such a ban.

The Circumcision Referendum: A Liberal Jewish Perspective by Sanford Borins, Ph.D.

<http://www.sanfordborins.com/2011/06/09/the-circumcision-referendum-a-liberal-jewish-perspective/>

Even Jewish celebrity Howard Stern has called for laws to protect infants from circumcision.

Howard Stern: Jewish Intactivist by Rebecca Wald, J.D.

<http://www.beyondthebris.com/2011/03/howard-stern-jewish-intactivist.html>

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## A Jewish Male Opposing Circumcision July 20, 2011 at 4:21 pm

“It seems to me that for liberal Jews the choice comes down to this. Do we want to in some way circumscribe the sexual possibilities of our sons by performing a body modification when they are infants so as to bear witness to the covenant? Are there not other ways to bear witness? Are there not other ways to maintain our distinctiveness from the society around us? Despite having circumcised my two sons, the more I think about the issue, the more likely – were I a resident of San Francisco – I would support the referendum.”

- Sanford Borins, Ph.D., The Circumcision Referendum: A Liberal Jewish Perspective

<http://www.sanfordborins.com/2011/06/09/the-circumcision-referendum-a-liberal-jewish-perspective/>

“Mutilation of the divinely made human body is as far from Judaism as anything could be. Even criminals are not mutilated, and the law limits the number of lashes to avoid permanent damage. Judaism objects to cuts made in grievance, and loathe the spilling human blood.”

- Israeli Linguist Vadim Cherny, How Judaic is the circumcision?

[http://vadimcherny.org/judaism/how\\_judaic\\_circumcision.htm](http://vadimcherny.org/judaism/how_judaic_circumcision.htm)

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## Hilary January 7, 2012 at 10:45 am

This debate can find a compromise, a middle point. How about at adulthood the man chooses for himself? There are stories of men circumcising themselves later in life. If memory serves me correctly ( haven't studied. Torah in a while), the Gemara understands that those men that left bondage in Mitzraim circumcised themselves. Here, from “Insights In the Daily Daf” an interesting discussion of the mitzvah of Milah: <http://www.dafyomi.co.il/yevamos/insites/ye-dt-046.htm>. I think in these times it is coming down to how do the Jewish people want/need to define themselves. We have reached a point in history that hasnt been written, only alluded to. What will we do now?

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## cosmopolite July 27, 2012 at 8:48 pm

“How about at adulthood the man chooses for himself?”

That is exactly my position. I invite unaffiliated parents, and Reform / Reconstructionist rabbis to make this the norm. I would hope Conservative rabbis would quietly tolerate this stance as well.

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