

The Jewish Roots of Anti-Circumcision Arguments

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Abstract:

Can a Jewish argument against circumcision be made? Lisa Braver Moss traces the Jewish origins of current concerns about circumcision and proposes that a carefully considered decision against circumcision can be reconciled within Jewish tradition. Physicians and midwives can facilitate this reconciliation by encouraging their Jewish clients to engage rabbis and other fellow Jews in fresh dialogue about the rite. Might Judaism be compromised by such a dialogue? Quite the contrary. Judaism can only benefit from it. Moss tells how her own inquiry into brit milah strengthened her Jewish identity and commitment.

I am going to begin by reading selected passages from Genesis, chapter 17.

And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk in my ways and be blameless. I will establish my covenant between me and you and I will make you exceedingly numerous. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham and I make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fertile and make nations of you and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain my covenant between me and you to be God to you and your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn in to you and to your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding; I will be their God.

God further said to Abraham:

As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep my covenant. Such shall be the covenant between me and you and your offspring to follow, which you shall keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin and that shall be the sign of the covenant between me and you. And throughout the generations every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin. He has broken my covenant.

I am a Jew and I question circumcision. I have been questioning circumcision ever since I learned of the rite as a girl. At that time I questioned circumcision because it seemed wrong to cause pain to infants and because it seemed strange to surgically alter a healthy God-given part of the body. As I grew into adulthood I added questions. I continue to add them. I question circumcision because of its risks. I question it because it is seen by many as a perfunctory act rather than a spiritual one. I question it because it seems to require parents to take advantage of their infant's dependence and weakness. I also question it because of the paradox that those who support infant circumcision often cringe at the idea of circumcision of an older child as a puberty rite. I am sure all of these concerns are familiar to health professionals, who also question circumcision.

During the last several years I have explored the topic of circumcision as a writer and as a Jew. I have two circumcised sons, ages five and two. I have written a couple of articles on brit milah, or the covenant of circumcision, for Jewish magazines. The first was published in *Tikkun* magazine in September of last year and my other one will appear later this

year in *Midstream* magazine. My inquiry into brit milah has convinced me that every one of my concerns about the rite is rooted not just in my own personal world view, but in Judaism itself.

Let us return to the concerns mentioned above, starting with pain. According to Jewish law, it is forbidden to cause tsa'ar ba'alei chaim, or pain of living things. Even the necessary causing of pain is considered cruel in Judaism. Jewish law even prohibits the pairing up of a small and a large animal for plowing in case the asymmetry causes the littler one discomfort. Clearly, concern over the pain of others has strong Judaic roots.

What about the concern that circumcision involves the surgical alteration of a perfectly natural God-given part of the body? This concern, too, stems from Jewish thought. Westerners generally find the bodily mutilation practiced in other cultures to be deeply distasteful. This distaste is based on the Hebrew bible's denouncement of pagan practices such as tattooing and cutting the flesh.

There is also the risk of serious complications, and even death, from circumcision. No matter how small these risks are, they must be considered. Now, even this concern is an echo of Jewish law. Judaism regards life as infinitely sacred and gives it precedence over all else. Accordingly, Jewish law tells us that any medical procedure involving even the possibility of risk to life must be viewed as dangerous and is, therefore, strictly forbidden. Thus, the risk of circumcision is not just a medical concern, but a Jewish one.

My concern that many see brit milah as a perfunctory act rather than as a spiritual one is also a Jewish concern. This is a thorny point of Jewish law, but I will try to summarize the issues. Judaism stresses deeds more than faith. So, according to Jewish law, one should perform the commandments, of which circumcision is one, even if the act does not reflect one's spiritual beliefs. Yet there is also a Jewish law requiring that one perform every commandment with one's whole heart, with spiritual intent, or kavana. So although Jewish law supports circumcision even when it is done without a broader commitment to Judaism, or God, there is also Jewish reason to find it unsettling when this happens.

Also mentioned above was the concern that circumcision requires parents to take advantage of their infant's helplessness. Even the concept, that we have a moral obligation to protect those who cannot protect themselves, is a Jewish concept. Additionally, the idea of treating others as you yourself would like to be treated is a Jewish one. According to Jewish lore, the legendary Rabbi Hillel was once asked to summarize Judaism while standing on one leg. Hillel replied: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow creature."

Finally, there is a slightly more esoteric concern. I question infant circumcision because it seems to me that a person's age should not affect our attitude towards his suffering. In other words, if we find the circumcision of older children offensive, we should find infant circumcision equally offensive. The most significant reason we as a society continue to practice infant circumcision, both medically and ritually, is that we do not respond to the suffering of infants in the same way we respond to the suffering of older children and adults. As parents our connection with our newborns is a very tenuous one, however strong it may feel when we first hold our little one and look into his or her eyes. The tenuousness of the bond only becomes apparent when we compare it to our bond with our older children. I personally could not subject my five-year old, or my two-year-old, to circumcision now for any reason other than absolute life or death necessity. This is not to say that it was easy for me to do at their birth, only that it would be impossible now. It is precisely this phenomenon that the advocates of routine neonatal circumcision are articulating when they advise parents to get it over with now because if one were to wait until the baby were older one would never do it. There is a way in which our infants are strangers to us as compared to our older children.

How would Judaism view this premise? If we do think of our infants as strangers on some level, and if our treatment of them is less humane because of it, Judaism disapproves. The commandment to love the stranger and not to oppress him appears not once, but 36 times, in the Torah (The Torah is the written text that forms the foundation of all Jewish law and thought). If we ask whether it is ethical to subject an infant to brit milah, when we would not subject an older child to the same ritual, we are asking a Jewish question.

All of the concerns outlined here, pain, surgical alteration of the body, medical risk, lack of spiritual conviction, taking advantage of helplessness, and oppressing a stranger, stem from Jewish concepts. This does not mean that circumcision is

an un-Jewish thing to do. Whether or not it conflicts with other Jewish principles, circumcision is still considered a quintessential Jewish act, a symbol of the covenant between God and the Jewish people and a primary emblem of Jewish identity. The point is that concerns about circumcision are also Jewish. Thus, a decision not to circumcise an infant, but to observe the covenant through a symbolic ceremony instead of a traditional one, can also be a Jewish decision.

Thousands of Jews today are questioning circumcision. Some are deciding not to circumcise their infant sons. By my estimates, American rabbis are getting at least 3,000 calls every year from parents who are in conflict about the rite. The parents who contact rabbis because they find brit milah problematic, are often requesting symbolic ceremonies as an alternative to traditional brit milah. They believe the covenant need not be established through a literal biblical interpretation. They voice concerns about circumcision that invariably stem from Jewish thinking. In addition to those parents who contact rabbis about their conflict, others are making the decision not to circumcise without contacting a rabbi. For this reason rabbis may not be aware how common it is for Jewish parents to question this ritual.

Rabbis these days are already performing symbolic covenant ceremonies for baby girls. While some rabbis are willing to perform such ceremonies for boys, these rabbis are still few and far between and prefer to remain anonymous. There is a grassroots Jewish group that distributes texts for symbolic ceremonies and provides support for parents who question brit milah. However, the questioning parents are still having to forfeit a rabbi-officiated ceremony because of their convictions. I am hoping that more rabbis will begin to offer symbolic ceremonies to boys, as well as to girls, and I will talk more later about how this might happen.

Because my research process has been quite an adventure, allow me now to explain how I arrived at the ideas I have summarized here. The early drafts of my writing about circumcision, before I had done much Jewish research, were very vehemently anti-circumcision. Underneath my vehemence was an intense feeling of guilt about agreeing to have my own sons circumcised, even though I had always found circumcision disturbing. My purpose in writing these early drafts was to shake people into thinking. If they became angry in the process, I figured it was a sign of their irrationality. Gradually, I began wanting to talk about my feelings in a way that would open peoples' minds rather than closing them. Gradually, I started looking to Judaism to deepen my inquiry, and gradually from within this inquiry I began to come to terms with my own experience of the rite. I began going to Jewish studies classes at my synagogue, reading about Judaism and pursuing various research paths about circumcision at the Jewish community library. I ran my new ideas past the rabbis at my synagogue, and from other branches of Judaism, to make sure my perceptions of Jewish law and history were sound.

In this way a dialogue was begun between rabbis and myself. My older son was attending the nursery school at my synagogue and I needed feedback from Jewish peers about the articles I was writing, so I began bouncing new ideas off my fellow parents at the nursery school as well. Many of the people in my life were surprised at my desire to question circumcision within a Jewish context. Yet, everyone with whom I have discussed my thoughts has been incredibly helpful in one way or another. Those who disagreed with me the most vehemently sometimes offered me the best insights and were sometimes the most gentle on my writer's ego, and those who thought I was onto something were occasionally my harshest critics. In the process of sharing my ideas, however, seeking feedback and refining my writings in a Jewish context, something unexpected began to happen. I began to feel connected as a Jew in a way I never had before. I began to experience for the first time in my life a sense of Jewish community. I found myself signing up to study Hebrew and learning the Sabbath blessings and prayers and preparing for my adult bar mitzvah ceremony, which was held last June. I found myself celebrating the Sabbath and attending services and sharing what I was learning of Judaism with my boys. I was getting a Jewish education for the first time, and I continue to pursue my interest in Judaism. I take my own Jewish heritage much more seriously now than I did before I began this inquiry.

How can health professionals respond to the needs of Jewish clients about the issue of Jewish circumcision? Surely everyone recognizes the importance of being sensitive and respectful. Outside the context of Judaism, however, it may be tempting to view the issue as a black-and-white question of human rights. To Jews it remains highly complex. What is the health professional to do? First of all, I would strongly discourage any health professional from attempting a Jewish discussion of circumcision unless he or she is also Jewish and/or deeply committed to studying the topic in depth beforehand. From the outside, it is nearly impossible to understand the complexities of this ritual and the pressures on Jewish parents regarding circumcision. This applies even for those Jews who are largely nonobservant and even for those who openly question circumcision. Sometimes out of respect for Judaism one must refrain from speaking one's mind about

a topic one feels strongly about. Of course, if Jewish parents want access to medical information regarding circumcision, it is the job of health care professionals to provide such information. In the event they feel circumcision is wrong medically, they have an obligation to say so. Although I have shared some of my Jewish inquiry about brit milah, let me stress once more that I would not recommend engaging in a Jewish dialogue with Jewish clients unless the health care professional is also Jewish and has an interest in the topic from a Judaic point of view. This dialogue is a Jewish one. I have shared it to demonstrate that the questions are all right there in Judaism itself. I believe the answers lie there too.

How might one handle Jewish clients who have decided to circumcise their infant for religious reasons? I would urge one not to become involved in this decision, either explicitly or by showing tacit disapproval, with one exception: If the clients cannot decide whether to do the circumcision in the hospital without ceremony, or on the eighth day with ceremony, I feel they should be encouraged to do the latter. Technically, a hospital circumcision without ceremony is not recognized as a Jewish circumcision. But beyond this technicality, as long as the parents have decided to circumcise their son because they are Jewish, a religious ceremony makes infinitely more sense than a sterile hospital circumcision.

How might Jewish clients who express concerns about circumcision be approached? This, too, requires the utmost sensitivity. Jewish clients should be encouraged to include rabbis and even mohels, who are ritual circumcisers, in their thoughts about the topic. How will Jewish leaders become aware of the scope of Jewish concern about circumcision unless they are consulted by parents? Jewish clients can call a rabbi and make an appointment to talk just as they would make an appointment to interview a pediatrician. They do not have to belong to a congregation to do so. This is not to suggest that Jewish parents will all have the time or inclination to turn their concern about brit milah into a major Jewish inquiry. They can, however, accomplish a lot by making their conflicts known to Jewish leaders, family and peers. Beyond this, in helping to create a Jewish dialogue about circumcision, they deepen their sense of their own Jewishness and give of themselves to Judaism.

Many Jews questioning circumcision will assume that their questions will not be well-received by mainstream Judaism. Unfortunately, Jewish leaders often reinforce this assumption by glossing over the concerns that parents raise about brit milah by trying to coax them into a traditional view of the rite. This may be changing a little.

The liberal branch of Judaism known as the Reform Movement has, in recent years, set up its own brit milah board and has instituted a program to certify physicians as Reform mohels. Unlike Orthodox mohels, these Reform mohels, being physicians, can administer local anesthesia and provide medical expertise, which some parents want. Of course, the certifying board, called the Brit Milah Board of Reform Judaism, believes strongly in a traditional interpretation of brit milah. They are, however beginning to include alternate viewpoints as part of their training class so that mohels can be sensitive to parents' conflicts about the rite. Just a week and a half ago, I gave a presentation at the local training class in which I discussed the need for covenantal ceremonies that do not include circumcision, and proposed that a mohel should not downplay parents' concerns or talk parents into a traditional interpretation if they express doubts about it. I have been invited to submit a chapter discussing my views for the next edition of the textbook for the training course. Reform Judaism certainly does not endorse a nontraditional view of brit milah, yet its Brit Milah Board has demonstrated a commitment to Jewish dialogue about the rite that includes nontraditional thinking.

There is one final point to be made about Jewish parents questioning circumcision. Some are limiting the scope of their inquiry by seeking only secular ammunition, medical arguments for example, against circumcision. By restricting their inquiry in this way, they are fostering the illusion that circumcision cannot be questioned from a Jewish point of view. This amounts to a form of protection or indulgence of Judaism, as if Judaism were a fragile relic, unable to function in light of new information and insights. This is not an accurate picture of contemporary Judaism. The beauty of Judaism is precisely its ability to reckon with changes in understanding. Judaism is, as Rabbi Milton Steinberg put it, an organism. Certainly, tradition keeps Judaism alive, but so does inquiry, dialogue, and well-thought-out change.

Before closing let me quote from the Jewish prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*. This poem is an incredibly beautiful illustration of Judaism's love of inquiry. This is a meditation called Doubt.

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the handmaiden of truth. Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge. It is the servant of discovery. A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and

imperfection in every belief. Doubt is the touchstone of truth. It is an acid which eats away the false. Let none fear for the truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief. For truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure. Those who would silence doubt are filled with fear. The house of their spirit is built on shifting sands. But they that fear not doubt, and know its use, are founded on a rock. They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge. The work of their hands shall endure. Therefore, let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help; it is to the wise as a staff to the blind. Doubt is the handmaiden of truth.

I would like to see a time when Jewish parents will be able to express their doubts about brit milah openly within the Jewish community and I would like Jewish parents to have the choice between observing brit milah traditionally or bringing their son into the covenant symbolically in a ceremony officiated by a rabbi. This will only come about from within Judaism when Jewish parents' concerns about circumcision are recognized as Jewish concerns. Whether Jewish clients of health care professionals have made a decision to circumcise their son, have some conflicts about it, or have decided categorically against it, they should be encouraged to participate in a dialogue within the Jewish community. Judaism needs their voices.

Biographical Notes

Lisa Braver Moss, B.A., a free-lance writer, received her B.A. with Great Distinction from the [University of California at Berkeley](#) (1977) Several of her articles questioning the Jewish circumcision ritual., Brit Milah, have appeared in Jewish publications, including "A Painful Case," an article focusing upon the current circumcision debate, in [Tikkun's](#) September/October 1990 bimonthly "Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture & Society." She lives in San Francisco.